THE STATE OF CRITICISM: IRVING HOWE, BARBARA ROSE, MARK SHECHNER

1981 $3.50

JOHN'S UNIVERSITY CAMPUS 1981

PARTISAN REVIEW/2

Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova
Inside the Kremlin

Marianne DeKoven
On Grace Paley

Charles Berezin
Poetry and Politics in Ezra Pound

Eugene Goodheart
All Our Cities

Roberta Satow
Narcissism or Individualism?

An Interview with Gilbert Sorrentino by Dennis Barone

New Fiction by Italo Calvino

Poetry
Rae Armantrout, C. Bursk, W.S. Di Piero, Milo De Angelis, Marea Gordett, Colette Inez, Ann Lauterbach, Brad Leithauser, Florence Rubenfeld, Armand Schwerner, Richard Thomas

Reviews
John Patrick Diggins
Richard B. Du Boff
David Layzer
Donald G. Marshall
Charles Molesworth
Neil Schmitz
Philip Stevick
Hayden White

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Pennsylvania Edition of
Sister Carrie
Theodore Dreiser
John C. Berkey and Alice M. Winters, historical editors; James L. W. West III, textual editor; Neda M. Westlake, general editor

Eighty years ago, his wife, his friend, and his publisher did their best to tone the book down. Dubbed too bleak, too sexually explicit, and too morbid philosophically, the novel was rewritten by Dreiser even before it was submitted to the publisher. Restoring 36,000 words, the Pennsylvania Edition now gives us Dreiser's original novel. **Sister Carrie** in its expanded form is, in effect, a new work of art by one of the major American novelists of this century.

$12.95 paper;
672 pp., illustrations.

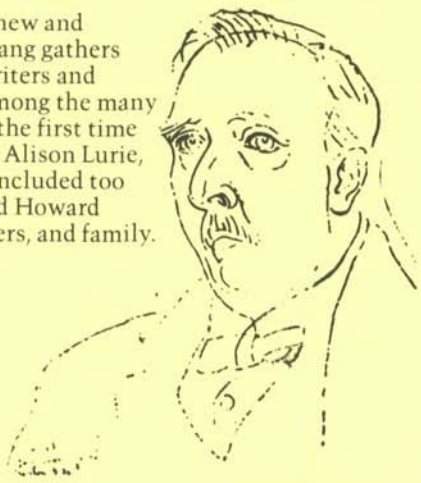
$29.95 cloth,
Coming in April.

The Presence of Ford Madox Ford

Edited, with an Introduction, by Sondra J. Stang

To provide a fresh perspective—from new and unexpected points of view—Sondra Stang gathers together a number of distinguished writers and critics to probe Ford and his works. Among the many contributors commenting on Ford for the first time are C. H. Sisson, William H. Pritchard, Alison Lurie, Denis Donoghue, and William Gass. Included too are new poems by Richard Howard and Howard Nemerov and memoirs by friends, lovers, and family.

$20.00; 256 pp., photos.
Coming in May.



Line drawing by Juan Gris

Available at your local bookstore or directly from

University of
Pennsylvania Press
3933 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A Controversy of Critics"
a symposium
celebrating the reopening
of
The School of Criticism and Theory
at
Northwestern University
May 8-9, 1981

René Girard, Stanford University, "Scapegoats and Representation" (with responses by Mary Douglas, Russell Sage Foundation, and Michel Serres, Sorbonne)

Murray Krieger, University of California, "'A Waking Dream': The Symbolic Alternative to Allegory" (with responses by M. H. Abrams, Cornell University, and Paul de Man, Yale University)

Edward Said, Columbia University, "Critical Consciousness, the Degradation of Theory, and the Dogmas of Culture" (with responses by Wayne Booth, University of Chicago, and Gerald Graff, Northwestern University)

Hayden White, University of California, Santa Cruz, "Narrative Modes and Ideological Strategies" (with responses by Hazard Adams, University of Washington, and Susan Rubin Suleiman, Occidental College)

For further information, write
Donald E. Collins, Associate Provost
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY
Rebecca Crown Center • Evanston, Illinois 60201

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PARTISAN REVIEW

William Phillips, EDITOR

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Edith Kurzweil
Steven Marcus

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Kathleen Agena
Julia Prewitt Brown
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese
Barbara Rosecrance

EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE
Joan C. Schwartz

STAFF
Maura J. Carey
Ellen Klavan

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Estelle Leontief

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Peter Brooks
Morris Dickstein

CONSULTANTS
John Ashbery
Norman Birnbaum
Richard Gilman
Frank Kermode
Christopher Lasch
Barbara Rose
Susan Sontag
Stephen Spender

PUBLICATIONS AND ADVISORY BOARD
Edward E. Booher
Lillian Braude
Carter Burden
Cynthia G. Colin
Joan Ganz Cooney
H. William Fitelson
Gerald J. Gross
Marjorie Iseman
Shirley Johnson Lans
Vera List
Eugene Meyer
Robert H. Montgomery, Jr.
Lynn Nesbit
David B. Pearce, M.D.
Joanna S. Rose
Alan Silverman
Roger L. Stevens
Robert Wechsler

CORRESPONDING EDITORS
Paul Kurt Ackermann, Paul Delany, Leslie Epstein, Eugene Goodheart, Lawrence Graver, Donald Marshall, Leonard Michaels, John Romano, Neil Schmitz, Roger Shattuck, Mark Shechner, Philip Stevick, Alan Trachtenberg

PARTISAN REVIEW, published quarterly by PR, Inc., is at Boston University, 128 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215 and at 522 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10036. Subscriptions $12.50 a year, $23.00 for two years, $32.50 for 3 years; foreign subscriptions, including Canada, $14.25 a year, $26.25 for two years; institutions, $18.00 for one year. All payments from foreign countries must be made by U.S. money orders or checks payable in U.S. currency. Single copy: $3.50. No manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury. Copyright © 1980 by P.R., Inc. Second class postage paid at New York, NY and additional entries.

Distributed in the U.S.A. by DeBoer, Nutley, NJ 07710, Capitol News, Boston 02120, L-S Distribution, San Francisco 94109, Guild News Agency, Chicago 60614, Skylo, Seattle 98122, Southwest Literary Express, Las Cruces, NM 88001.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PR2 1981-VOLUME XLVIII NUMBER 2

CONTENTS

NOTES		**172**
THE STATE OF CRITICISM		
Irving Howe **Barbara Rose** **Mark Shechner**	*Theory and Practice*	**173**
ARTICLES		
Vladimir Solovyov **Elena Klepikova**	*Inside the Kremlin*	**203**
Marianne DeKoven	*Mrs. Hegel-Shtein's Tears*	**217**
Dennis Barone	*An Interview with Gilbert Sorrentino*	**236**
Charles Berezin	*Poetry and Politics in Ezra Pound*	**262**
Eugene Goodheart	*All Our Cities*	**280**
FICTION		
Italo Calvino	*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*	**224**
POEMS		**247**

Rae Armantrout, C. Bursk, W.S. Di Piero, Milo De Angelis, Marea Gordett, Colette Inez, Ann Lauterbach, Brad Leithauser, Florence Rubenfeld, Armand Schwerner, Richard Thomas

VARIETY		
Roberta Satow	*Narcissism or Individualism?*	**285**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS

John Patrick Diggins	*Against the Current* by Isaiah Berlin	**289**
Donald G. Marshall	*Deconstruction and Criticism* by Harold Bloom et al	**294**
	Spurs by Jacques Derrida	
	A Theory of Literary Production by Pierre Macherey	
Richard B. Du Boff	*The Zero-Sum Society* by Lester C. Thurow	**298**
David Layzer	*Bias in Mental Testing* by Arthur R. Jensen	**307**
Hayden White	*Allegories of Reading* by Paul de Man	**311**
Charles Molesworth	*Blue Wine and Other Poems* by John Hollander	**315**
	The Strength of Fields by James Dickey	
	An Explanation of America by Robert Pinsky	
Neil Schmitz	*Letters* by John Barth	**320**
Philip Stevick	*The Mysteries of Identity* by Robert Langbaum	**323**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

These are some of the people who have written for

PARTISAN REVIEW

A. Alvarez, Hannah Arendt, John Ashbery, James Baldwin, Donald Barthelme, Jonathan Baumbach, Samuel Beckett, Isaiah Berlin, Norman Birnbaum, Harold Brodkey, Peter Brooks, Robert Brustein, Anthony Burgess, Noam Chomsky, Robert Coles, Robert Coover, Robert Creeley, Morris Dickstein, Jules Feiffer, Michel Foucault, William Gass, Richard Gilman, Allen Ginsberg, Clement Greenberg, Peter Handke, Michael Harrington, Lillian Hellman, Richard Howard, Irving Howe, Frank Kermode, Christopher Lasch, Doris Lessing, Denise Levertov, Robert Lowell, Jack Ludwig, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Steven Marcus, Herbert Marcuse, Mary McCarthy, James Merrill, Leonard Michaels, Juliet Mitchell, Hans Morgenthau, Victor Navasky, Joyce Carol Oates, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Rose, Harold Rosenberg, Philip Roth, Meyer Schapiro, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Roger Shattuck, Alan Sillitoe, Susan Sontag, Gilbert Sorrentino, Stephen Spender, Christina Stead, William Styron, Diana Trilling, Lionel Trilling, Gore Vidal, Robert Penn Warren...

Why don't you become one of our readers?

PARTISAN REVIEW
c/o Boston University, 128 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215

☐ Enter my subscription
☐ 1 year at $12.50
☐ 1 year at $11.00 (student rate)*
☐ Institutional rate $18.00

☐ Extend my subscription
☐ 2 years at $23.00
☐ 2 years at $20.00 (student rate)*
☐ 3 years at $32.50

☐ Please bill me
☐ My check is enclosed

☐ Mastercharge _____ card # _____ expiration date
☐ VISA _____ card # _____ expiration date

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

*I am a student at _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOTES

IRVING HOWE has recently edited a Portable Kipling. . . . **BARBARA ROSE** is the author of *American Art Since 1900*. . . . **MARK SHECHNER** teaches English at the State University of New York, Buffalo. . . . Russian-born **VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV** and **ELENA KLEPIKOVA** are now fellows at Columbia University's Russian Institute. . . . An English professor at Rutgers University, **MARIANNE DeKOVEN** has just finished a book on Gertrude Stein. . . . **ITALO CALVINO** is best known in this country for his *Italian Folktales*. . . . A resident of Philadelphia, **DENNIS BARONE** edits *Tamarish* magazine. . . . **RAE ARMANTROUT** lives in San Diego, California. . . . **C. BURSK** is the author of *Standing Watch*. . . . **W.S. Di PIERO**'s translation of Giacomo Leopardi's *Pensieri* is being published by Louisiana State University Press. . . . The Italian poet **MILO De ANGELIS** is the author of *Resemblances*; his translator **LAWRENCE VENUTI** teaches in the English department at Temple University. . . . **MAREA GORDETT** is a member of the English department of Boston University. . . . **COLETTE INEZ** is at work on her third collection of poems. . . . The University of Texas Press has brought out **ANN LAUTERBACH**'s *Many Times, But Then*. . . . **BRAD LEITHAUSER**'s first book of poems, *Hundreds of Fireflies*, will appear early next year. . . . **FLORENCE RUBENFELD** lives in New York. . . . **ARMAND SCHWERNER**'s most recent book of poems was published by New Rivers. . . . Avon Books put out **RICHARD THOMAS**'s first two books of poems, *Poems* and *In the Moment*. . . . **CHARLES BEREZIN** lectures at Tufts University and at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. . . . **EUGENE GOODHEART** is a professor of English at Boston University. . . . **ROBERTA SATOW** teaches sociology at the City University of New York. . . . A professor of history at the University of California at Irvine, **JOHN PATRICK DIGGINS** is the author of *The Bard of Savagery* and *Up From Communism*. . . . **DONALD G. MARSHALL** teaches English and comparative literature at the University of Iowa. . . . **RICHARD B. Du BOFF** is a professor of Economics at Bryn Mawr College. . . . **DAVID LAYZER** is Donald H. Menzel Professor of astrophysics at Harvard University. . . . **HAYDEN WHITE**, a historian at the University of California at Santa Cruz, has written *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse*. . . . **CHARLES MOLESWORTH** teaches at Queens College. . . . **NEIL SCHMITZ** is in the English department at the State University of New York in Buffalo. . . . **PHILIP STEVICK** teaches at Temple University.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE STATE OF CRITICISM: THEORY AND PRACTICE*

Irving Howe

Literary criticism resembles the Jews: easy to recognize but hard to define. Making demands upon the imagination, literary criticism falls short, as it should, of the creative. Nothing if not a mode of discursive writing, it is yet something more and other than discursive writing. Forever dependent upon imaginative texts, it nevertheless strains, like an indulged colony, to gain complete independence; but let it so much as approach independence and it loses its ground for being, dissolves into a mist of pretension and prose poetry. Literary criticism always keeps asking itself—I am not sure anyone else cares—what it is and what it does, and, oddly, it thrives most when not too sure of the answer.

The ideal critic, a monster to be avoided, knows everything, since he knows that nothing need be irrelevant to his text. The actual critic, poor battered creature, tries simply to bring to bear upon a work or group of works whatever personal resources of knowledge and sensibility he has trained himself to have. A critic might profit from knowing philosophy, science, history, linguistics, Freudianism, Marxism, and semiotics; when doing his job of work, he is wise if he restrains his erudition. Good critics are kept on short leashes.

No one has yet established fixed boundaries to literary criticism, though almost everyone agrees it should have them. The lack of boundaries is a source of the large potential interest criticism can have, as also of its large probable disaster. Criticism is one of the last disciplines—and not very disciplined at that—which makes a claim for the solitary speaker, the defenseless writer, engaged in a wide-ranging discourse. It is a very risky business to get into. Everything becomes a matter of fit or, as an earlier age would say, of decorum. How well do my capacities of response match up with a given writer? Is his thought beyond my range, his experience out of my reach, his sensibility

*This discussion took place at the New School for Social Research in the summer of 1980.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inaccessible to me, as certain sounds are said to be beyond our hearing? And if we do form a fit, either in harmony or friction, can I then proceed to offer a description of his work that will serve the modest purpose, as Randall Jarrell once put it, of "simply helping us with works of art?"

Nothing could be more treacherous than this word "describe." To describe a poem or novel is to place it in some line of tradition to which it submits yet from which it also deviates; and in order to manage that I must have—so T.S. Eliot tells me—"the historical sense . . . a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [my] own country has a simultaneous existence. . . ." This is intimidating enough, but there is more. To describe a work is also to be alert to whatever margin of individuality, whatever sliver of freshness in voice or vision, it may have. And to describe that work is also to propose some approximation of value—by myself, who supposedly has the whole of European literature from Homer in my head—an approximation of value that is to be made through placing it in relation to other works. Notoriously imprecise as the language of criticism is, its language of valuation is simply scandalous. Yet we have no choice. The very act of summoning attention to this poem or that novel implies an assumption of value, for as William Wimsatt writes, "explication in the neutral sense [can be] so integrated with special and local value intimations that it rises from neutrality gradually and convincingly to the point of local judgment." And what can we do with local judgment but extend it?

All this is becoming rather discouraging, but I push on.

How in fact does one become a literary critic? No one issues a license, no one gives a test. You become a literary critic by declaring yourself a literary critic, an act of high presumption that you must then try to validate. You can also declare that you have a theory of criticism—formalist, Marxist, structuralist, whatever—but no one will really suppose this enough to make your criticism worth reading. Whether the theory even enables you to become a good critic is a question.

Writing criticism and theorizing about either literature or criticism are both legitimate, sometimes valuable activities; but I want to maintain that they are different activities, with concerns and talents that do not often overlap. T.S. Eliot believed that the good critic possesses not a set of theoretical premises by which to set things straight but a mature and unified sensibility ripened through long meditation on the literary tradition and perhaps on the human

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

situation as well. In so recruiting Eliot for my bias, I want nevertheless to remember the Yiddish proverb that "for example is no proof."

The question of the relation between literary theory and critical practice was raised several decades ago in a public letter sent by René Wellek, a literary historian and theorist, to F.R. Leavis, a literary critic. Where, demanded Wellek, is your theory? How do you explain or control or justify whatever it is you do? Most of us might be intimidated by this query, as if called to a court of judgment at Yale. Leavis was not. A critic, he replied, might just be "the better for a philosophical training [that is, in aesthetic theory] but if he were, the advantage . . . would manifest itself partly in a surer realization that literary criticism is not philosophy."

Well, then, what *is* it? I would say that it is the disciplined act of reading "simply to help us [that is, others] with works of art." This act of reading requires the capacity, partly intuitive, to see works of art in their community with others and partly to see them in their fragile uniqueness. "The critic's aim," writes Leavis, "is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. . . . The business of the literary critic is to attain a peculiar completeness of response and to observe a peculiarly strict relevance in developing his response into commentary; he must be on guard against abstracting improperly from what is in front of him. . . ."

The charged and difficult words here are "peculiar completeness of response" and "abstracting improperly." Let me try to suggest what Leavis means, or ought to mean, by providing two examples.

In reading the poems of Robert Frost we may wonder why we so often hear, especially in those we judge to be less than great, a jeer in his voice. What does that jeer signify? Even moderately expert readers are likely to recognize that this note, the description of which I have barely begun, is special to Frost, not part of the common language of American or modern poetry. Were that note all we encountered in Frost's poems, they would hardly be worth our attention, but to miss it would, I think, mean to fail in Leavis's "peculiar completeness of response." That completeness requires a delicate balancing of Frost's wish—the wish we conclude to be present *in* the poems—to convey both the tone of the sage and the tone of the simple feller, the inheritor of wisdom and the tiller of soil, the mind superior to, indeed, contemptuous of intellectuals and the mind evidently uneasy with, perhaps afraid of intellectuals. Now, properly to make this "peculiar completeness of response" requires some knowledge, tactfully invoked,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the Emersonian tradition, that is, of American writing before Frost, which also means in part that American tradition which consists in disparaging tradition. This done, it might be possible to make a longish leap and attack Frost as an enemy of rationality and liberalism (which he may personally have been); but to do that might well be, in Leavis's phrase, to be "abstracting improperly," for it would be to ignore too much else, complicating and enriching, in Frost's poems. It would not, however, be "abstracting improperly" to notice that his opinions and prejudices, still more his provocative stances, sometimes work within the poems to corrupt their feeling, to establish a surface of irritability and discomfiting aggression.

My second example concerns the work of the extremely talented novelist V.S. Naipaul. As a rough approximation we can say that his recent novels return obsessively to delusions and corruptions of so-called Third World countries emerging from colonial status but without adequate social or intellectual preparation, without either industrial infrastructure or liberal tradition, for becoming modern, more-or-less free societies. A peculiar blend of indigenous brutality, decadent radical rhetoric, and nationalist frustration is portrayed by Naipaul in a way that one may judge to be honest, even liberating, in its corrosiveness. Yet one remains uneasy. That "peculiar completeness of response" Leavis has called for demands that we fret a little about the seeming obsessiveness, perhaps vindictiveness, with which Naipaul portrays these delusions and corruptions. There is an absence of any notes of hope, transcendence, asserted positives: there is perhaps an illicit, unacknowledged emotion in his assault. Is it "abstracting improperly" to ask, as I did in a recent review of Naipaul's most recent and very brilliant novel, whether an ideological irritability makes his corrosiveness, for all its value, a little suspect? I am not sure, but I know the question presents itself.

In the case of Frost, the critic is confronted with difficulties concerning the "character" of the poet, not as a historical person but as a voice rendered in his poems. In the case of Naipaul, the critic is confronted with difficulties concerning the relation of politics to the novel, ideology to art. If there is a theory which can dispose of these problems for me, I shall be glad to receive it. My own experience, for whatever it is worth, tells me that I have to rely on, for whatever *they* are worth, my resources of tact, sensibility, hearing, and sympathy.

But do not we believe that the unexamined life is not worth living—especially we critics who declare ourselves the great examiners?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Is it really enough to say that the critic, learning what he can from predecessors through imitation and resistance, goes about his work with a set of procedures, maybe habits that are more or less implicit and even improvisatory? The novelist at least has the rationale that he is doing a work of imagination; but the critic has very little, if any, right to that rationale. He needs imagination, but he cannot invoke it in his defense.

To examine whatever it is that critics actually do would be extremely valuable, certainly interesting; but we know little about this because few critics know how to tell us. They are about as good at describing how they work as most people are at giving street directions. Critics I've talked to, from Lionel Trilling to Austin Warren, become oddly amused or embarrassed when such questions are asked. In perhaps Americanized versions of Leavis's loose formulas, they speak about "feeling their way into a work," "trying to make out a writer's controlling vision," or at most, "reading carefully for indices of style." But no critic that I know—perhaps I know the wrong ones—has ever spoken about applying a method or a theory. If there is a method, it generally uses the critic, rather than vice versa. Best of all, if a critic has deeply, organically absorbed certain world views—whether of Marx or Freud, Heidegger or Kierkegaard—they are likely to manifest themselves as tacit limits, points of response in his work. But theories and methods, in general, are things that critics of criticism talk about, and that is one reason most histories of criticism are bad. They catalogue "approaches" and chart "schools" rather than looking at the work of individual critics with something of the particularity critics are supposed to apply to novels and poems.

The critic's job of work constitutes an act of supreme, indeed of insufferable presumption: he makes the claim that his responses are of value and interest to others, and he makes it not just on the ground of knowledge, perhaps that least of all, but on the ground that within his cultivated sophistication there survives a capacity for fresh wonderment, a full and open responsiveness to works of art. If he is wrong in making this claim, as he usually is, he will suffer quick neglect. If he is merely dull and correct, he will publish. If he is a fool, he may even serve a purpose. But even if he is very good—even if, say, as in reading Virginia Woolf's essay on Jane Austen we experience a shock of pleasure and recognition when coming upon her remark that Jane Austen wrote like the Greek tragedians because "she, too, in her modest everyday prose, chose the dangerous art where one slip means death"—why, even then the life-span of a work of criticism is likely to be short.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Its insights absorbed or filched, with or without anxiety, the critical work falls into dust. That is why a serious continuity of dialectic, a living interchange of opinion and sensibility, count far more in criticism than the achievements of individual critics. Today, for example, we have no lack of talented critics, yet the situation of criticism is dreary.

In saying all this I don't mean at all to endorse a mere dilettantish impressionism, the pretensions of the *arbiter elegantiorum*, against high theory. Criticism is, or can be, a discipline; it is *very* hard to do; it is, mostly, a matter of training and response, even of imitating at first.

But is no theory of any use whatever even for the working critic, the drudge who writes reviews, the more ambitious chap who tries to compose essays in his spare time? I think, yes, it is of use, but in rather quirky ways and almost never through mere submission and discipleship.

A light-fingered recognition of theory can prevent a surplus of error. We all know that theories of genre are peculiarly susceptible to a sterile multiplication of terms. But if somewhere in the back of our minds we have an awareness of the idea of genres, it can enable us to avoid false expectations—which is already, I would guess, to reduce critical error by half. A kindergarten example: we must not expect complex plots in sonnets. Yet, as we read Shakespeare's sonnets and Robert Lowell's sonnet-like poems about American politics in the sixties we can make out the lineaments of a complex plot behind, decidedly behind, the language—we can make out all that has been kept out of the work but which somehow exerts a pressure upon it. The bad critic proceeds to write an extended "study" of these background plots, as if to forget that what he really has before him are very brief poems. The better critic, who usually works on the tacit premise that what counts most in literature is the foreground, will easily, almost as a matter of course, keep the backgrounds where they belong: in the background. Or, now, a second grade example: A critic who has thought through the subgenre we call the "antiutopian" novel, will not complain, as Raymond Williams has, that the characters in Orwell's *1984* are insufficiently complex, for he will understand that a major point of this subgenre is to summon—by a single step beyond the probable—a society in which complex character has, so to say, been forbidden. At the least, then, theories of genre can check our natural rush to stupidity.

A light-fingered recognition of literary theory can help the work-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing critic if he brings to bear upon it an amiable skepticism. We say, for instance, that literature is not life, it is about life, but it is about life in a very special way, rather more like a lamp than a mirror, yet insofar as it is like a mirror that is likely to be a consequence of its being like a lamp. Such rule of thumb recognitions derive no doubt from critical theories far more elaborate in nature and they help to keep one in an uneasy balance between the word and the world. Yet there is also the check of practical criticism upon theory. One may, for instance, be aware of the difficulties that can be marshalled with regard to theories of imitation or mimesis, but I don't know of one critic worth reading—be he formalist or social, New or New York—who doesn't finally, in however modulated a fashion, fall back upon some version of the theory of imitation. It cannot be helped. If you recall the passage I quoted somewhat earlier from the strict formalist W.K. Wimsatt about the way "explication" finally gives rise to "local judgment," you will see, I think, that it makes no sense without some resort to a theory of mimesis. When Warren and Wellek in their *Theory of Literature* offer as the criteria for judgment of poems and novels "coherence" and "complexity," they are, wittingly or not, proposing terms of cognition and valuation that derive from and require a return to the world of shared moral and social experience. William Empson, as complex in negotiating with language as anyone need be, writes that when I.A. Richards derides people who after reading Shakespeare say "How true," Richards is making "an attack on what almost everyone had felt, on what was most strikingly witnessed . . . by Dr. Johnson, that in spite of all their faults the plays are somehow inescapably 'like life.' I do not think anyone can write any useful criticism of Shakespeare if one has succeeded in repressing this sentiment." And not, it might be added, of Shakespeare alone.

A light-fingered recognition of literary theory helps most of all those who engage it through opposition. If you look back to the once famous quarrel between the New and the New York critics, you will see that it was we in New York who profited most from the insistence of Ransom, Warren, and Tate that the literary text be treated, at least provisionally, as autonomous, even though it might in some sense also tell us things about morality, religion, and politics. We profited more than the pliant disciples of the New Criticism because it was we who most needed to learn its cautionary lessons, we who were most likely to succumb to those "fallacies" and "heresies" against which they warned. By the same token, our resistance to their more extreme positions kept us from transforming improvisations into dogmas. It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

allowed us to see, for instance, that Yvor Winters's "fallacy of imitative form" was a shorthand signal of his distrust of modernist literature, a literature in which that "fallacy" has been put to brilliant use.

In turn, the New Critics may have profited from our insistence that literature was rooted in the soil of history and that critical judgment could not be closed off, in some vacuum of purity, from the moral and social dispositions of the critic. Allen Tate had defined the New Criticism as distinguished by "a hostility to, or neglect of the 'historical method'"—by which I suppose he meant the peculiarly sterile version of "historical method" that flourished some decades ago in the academy. But the joke of it is that the work of the best New Critics is saturated with historical awareness—you need only look at Tate's essay on Emily Dickinson, Austin Warren's essays on the New England writers.

It barely matters which group learned more from the other. What made for a lively critical atmosphere in the forties and fifties was that the two groups clashed in an abrasive friendliness over "positions" that involved attitudes toward a modernist literature they both admired as well as questions of how to defend or redefine the terms of civilization. I think the "positions" of both groups melted away under the pressures of circumstance, but that hardly matters.

The happiest situation for the critic occurs when he is struggling in behalf of a great new literary movement or cultural impulse, say, Hazlitt for the romantics, Eliot for the modernists. Those of us under seventy are really latecomers to the struggle for modernism, indeed, witnesses to the excess—and excesses—of its triumph. And we have no equivalent occasion for taking up our energies and interests. The critics in my own time that I have most envied were not literary at all; they were art critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg who declared themselves intellectual advocates of a major new group in modern art, the abstract expressionists. That this probably led them to occasional foolishness and fanaticism seems hardly to matter as much as the energy and incentive they were able to gain from a close supportive relationship to major artists.

If critics do well in such a relationship, they may also do well at times when their ideologies, their grand systems, have started to decompose. The best work of the New York critics was done when the power of Marxism could still be felt, but not felt so strongly as to make everything fixed and predictable. Marxism in decomposition offered a spur to improvising, to the release of personality, to moving *a little*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beyond; yet there were still some controls and boundaries, shared terms of value. In such circumstances the critic is freed but not wholly freed; no longer a captive but not yet a wanderer.

To be a first-rate critic you need a first-rate mind, but not many first-rate minds are likely to be content for long simply to remain critics. It's an occupational risk, perhaps an occupational disaster. So critics turn to other things, trying—seldom well—to write fiction and verse. Or they become, like Winters and Leavis, guru figures of cultural sects. Anyone who ever heard R.P. Blackmur speak could easily have imagined him back 150 or 200 years ago as one of those subtle New England preachers. Philip Rahv was, in half of himself, a Leninist politician or a Social Democratic parliamentary whip. If Harold Bloom were able to find the sublime anywhere else, he might not be searching for it so persistently in American literature.

Imprecise, perilous, hard to justify, full of pitfalls, "each venture . . . a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating"—this is our lot. Nothing will save us, not method, not theory. Our only way is a loving submission to the charms and powers of the word, a strict training in the observation of the created verbal object. André Gide once spoke disparagingly about critics who search "for criteria without wishing to go to the trouble of acquiring taste." T.S. Eliot said, "the only method is to be very intelligent." If Eliot was right, we can understand why so many of us are driven to look for other methods.

Barbara Rose

I missed yesterday's sessions because I was at the graduation ceremonies at Andover. The headmaster spoke about criticism. He apologized to the student body for having inhibited them by teaching them critical attitudes. Because these young people had evolved critical faculties, presumably they were inhibited in terms of living in the real world. I think the feeling that the critical attitude is paralyzing or that the inhibiting is itself a bad thing is widespread. Criticism in general is in a state of decline—but nowhere is it declining faster than in the art world. Part of the reason is the significant discrepancy between literary criticism, which has been more stable and rooted within a historical

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

framework, and art criticism, which has flourished outside of this framework as a dilettante's pastime and which seems to require less training and experience.

When Baudelaire wrote for a newspaper-reading audience in the nineteenth century, it was presumed that this audience, as well as the patron class that bought paintings, was literate. We can no longer make this assumption. Today we cannot really assume that either the art public or the art critic is literate. The question of literacy at a fundamental level is relevant. Moreover, the work of art is complete in a way that the literary work is not. That is to say, it is manifest in a single moment in time, it is available at once, it seems to obviate the kind of explication that a literary work requires. It is there for one to see and appreciate in its sensual character, without "interpretation." Such an attitude perceives art criticism as relatively, if not entirely, superfluous to the direct appreciation of the work of art. Moreover, whereas the criticism of literature is the critique of an idea, art criticism analyzes an object, which not only exists as a tangible entity in the world, but also has special status as a tradable commodity in that world. The economic factor dominates art criticism in a way I don't think it determines the scope and substance of literary criticism. The enlargement of the so-called public for art has altered the function of art in society. This in turn has radically altered the function of art criticism, which serves now not to judge, analyze, or interpret, but to validate the commodity function of the artwork.

At a time when art was basically the concern of a small, educated elite, the lines between academic official art, avant-garde art, and commercial or popular art were still firmly drawn. But now, because of the mass media and their impact on cultural values, we have entered a period in which art is the concern of the masses and these boundaries are disappearing. The masses do not need validation of their taste from "elitist" experts because they are museum tourists, not investors. They receive their information through catalogs, brochures, audio-visual guides, and the mass media, including television. Now, the important difference with this information is that it is not criticism, it is reportage—it observes, reports, documents, and conveys information in a neutral, nonjudgmental fashion. Criticism, on the other hand, dissects, analyzes, and most importantly makes value judgments. In recent years in art criticism, we have seen a movement to eradicate the value judgment as the basis of the critical act. The critical function, which is the analysis of significance, and the qualitative judgment, cannot be performed in the context of journalism, the context in which

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at this point most art writing takes place. One reason is lack of space, which precludes an extensive analysis.

To return to the economic factor: with very few exceptions, it is no longer possible, as it was when I began to write in the early sixties, to earn a living as an art critic. The art magazines, which were at that time run in the red as tax write-offs, are now required by mass conglomerate owners to produce a profit. This profit can only be achieved at the expense of the critics' surplus value. In the cultural climate of bottom line economics, criticism functions as printed decor surrounding reproductions.

At present, a number of the art magazines assure their advertisers of reviews. Even if editorial space is not literally bought, editorial and advertising content merge to such a degree that the two become inseparable. To attract a larger audience, more popular subjects are constantly sought by art editors. If, for example, you go to a newsstand and pick up an issue of *Art News*, it is not the *Art News* Thomas Hess edited. It is a strictly commercial magazine pitched at a mass market; the writing has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with any activity that could be considered art criticism.

Given this dismal picture, *why* does anyone write art criticism and *for whom*? Printing costs prohibit marginal magazines from publishing opinions counter to those held by the art market. Publishing a serious analytical article involving a judgment in value is costly to the critic who must find some means of support in teaching or journalism. And it is not in the interest of the art magazines which exist today to support the art market and to entertain the public. The question even arises whether the art market at this point acts as the absolute censor of the art press by deciding what will reach print.

Conceptual art, for better or for worse, was a reaction to the domination of the market. It eliminated the problem by eliminating the artwork. Now there is a new conceptual criticism, an art writing not involved in judging art, but in using it as a jumping-off point for structuralist or semiotic abstractions indifferent to the values (moral or aesthetic or qualitative) of the object under discussion. Now it's very important that these new methodologies—structuralism, semiotic analysis and so on—are, unlike Marxist criticism, value free. They must be neutral and value free for the critic to be superior to the work being examined. The new sense of self-importance of the art critic is, I feel, characteristic of the decline of the audience. Today, everyone, including the art critic, wants to get into the act. Or better still, to *be* the act.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Many people who feel that they want to call themselves, for whatever reason, art critics, focus primarily not on art but on projecting a sense of self. They therefore must conceive of what they do not as subordinate to the work of art but as a separate entity, an entity as creative and autonomous as the work of art itself. In the place of criticism we now have a kind of confessional literature of a highly suspicious character, which predicates itself on the obvious fact that criticism is subjective and takes this subjectivity and runs it into the ground. We have records of the studio visits, the digressions, the gossip, all in the guise of criticism. This self-indulgent letter writing is published because art editors have to scramble to decorate the advertisements with some sort of copy that makes them look presentable.

The critic as artist who writes true confessions, the critic as structuralist or deconstructionist, the critic as semiotic analyst, pursues an entirely value free activity. The methodology employed is neutral. Therefore, the critic is not involved in any ideology, formalist or Marxist. Judgments of any kind become unnecessary to value free activity. It is crucial to the pluralistic culture we now embrace publicly to eliminate hierarchies of value. We do not have to choose, I heard someone say recently, between Henry James and Bugs Bunny any more. Critics used to be the referees who forced that choice. Today they are free to perform a structural analysis of Disneyworld—or to write an art book or museum catalog about it. The liquidation of the critical function is essential to the inevitable progression toward total massification. However, the collaboration of critics themselves in this process is not altogether necessary.

Mark Shechner

How can anyone take issue with Irving Howe when he tells us the literary critic should be intelligent, and should submit to the discipline of acquiring taste before handing out judgment? What is anyone to do but declare himself of Irving Howe's party and pass on to other issues? I would even second his vote for a "light-fingered recognition of literary theory" over the heavy-handed displays of theoretical attainment that now clutter up so much of literary criticism, though I wouldn't put it quite that way. Light-fingeredness suggests dilettantism, the better critic being a pickpocket of ideas, a user of stolen goods. That is not what I think, or hope, Irving Howe

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

proposes as an antidote to certain dismal practices of the moment. I find him closer to the mark in observing that "if there is a method, it generally uses the critic, rather than vice versa." That certainly rings true to my own sense of things. What has crept into criticism these days is a trick of ventriloquism; the critic's mouth works, words pour forth, the performance of speech is carried off with greater or lesser art. It does seem an art, as the critic gestures to a voice that is patently not his own. One feels more and more, in the theoretical mood that presently grips the academy, that the critic's voice has come loose from his heart, or seeks to give the impression that the heart itself is wooden to the core.

Has Max Weber's nightmare of the future, of "mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance," been realized at last in the very center of what used to be called "the humanities"? Are our practitioners of the advanced technologies of interpretation those very "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" whom Weber foresaw as the masters of the last stage of cultural development?

I take little comfort in reflecting that the current phase of the avant-garde movement in literature and criticism, which has always promoted a liberation of spirit, now gives us a certain chilled mechanicalism of speech, a cold ritualization of gesture: mere routines of freedom. What one sees in so many instances of the *nouvelle critique* in American journals is the critic's surrender of the full range of his responses in favor of a rigorous system of decoding, from which competing areas of inquiry are closed off. The critic who has taken critical theory to heart prepares for his job of work by clearing away that contaminating element in himself that experiences the world, in order to work with its signs uninhibited by feeling, recollection, or alien concepts.

I would concur with Irving Howe that to become a critic demands that one first become a particular kind of human being: skeptical, curious, demanding, and trusting of one's own "resources of tact, sensitivity, hearing, and sympathy." And while I'm patently not being very sympathetic at the moment, I would lay particular stress upon the critic's resources of sympathy, his willingness to test new ideas and ways of being-in-the-world and to suspend judgment before the unknown and the unwelcome. To do this with any consistency requires that critics trust experience more, not less, since the skills demanded by criticism, as I understand it, are nothing less than those demanded by life. Of what use to the reader is a critic's theory or technique or methodology if he has no understanding of life, or holds his understanding to a professional liability? To what end do we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

demand less of criticism than we do of literature, that we permit the arts of discrimination an inferior grasp of experience than those of creation? Gore Vidal says somewhere that the novel is the art of the middle-aged, meaning that nobody under thirty-five knows enough or has acquired enough humility to write a decent novel. The same holds true for criticism, where theory breaks out wherever there is an insufficiency of experience.

This is not a new problem, as may be surmised from Alfred Kazin's ringing complaint in his preface to *On Native Grounds* in 1942: "We have seen the life taken out of criticism, the human grace, the simple all-enveloping knowledge that there are no separate 'uses' in literature, but only its relevance to the whole life of man." The situation in which Kazin had to work was, if anything, more dangerous than our own. Criticism then was flanked by "the twin fanaticisms" that had sought to dominate it since the early 1930s: the sociological and the textual. Our present situation resembles that one to the extent that narrow technologies of interpretation have missionary designs on literature to an unprecedented degree. The graduate student in an advanced English department (or, more commonly a comparative literature department) is under pressure to take up structuralism or post-structuralism, psychoanalysis (which now comes in more flavors than the quark), French Freud (and its particularly hypnotic shadow, Lacanianism), or Marxism as alternatives to the traditional historical field. And while it is still possible to become, say, an eighteenth century man, it is just not very exciting to do so. Yet this situation on the whole is more tractable than the one Kazin complained of, if only because competing claims are no longer issued with the stridency and moral fervor they once were. Critics of every sort are now fed and clothed by the same academy as part of a "well-rounded" curriculum of literary studies; we all conduct our careers by the same rules of tenure and advancement, and while that does not always take the edge off our disagreements, it does render them comical in the long view, since we have little but impersonal questions of value or our own self-esteem to fight over. Each new ideology is now little more than a fresh and temporarily exciting addition to the pluralist academy, and is quickly disarmed to the same degree as all the rest.

Indeed, certain criticisms of the moment, deconstruction in particular, would appear at first glance to suggest grounds for a general reconciliation of all ideologies through a universal undermining of all brands of self-assurance. The idea that there exists an ineluctable gap between a word and the images or feelings it purports to express and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the idea that any word might be essentially a rhythmic or lexical convenience signifying nothing at all is fairly unobjectionable. As a counsel of caution they are even salutary; they restore to literature a welcome sense of mystery by promising that interpretation is always incomplete, even that it can scarcely be said to begin. Indeed, it may be argued that the governing ideas of deconstruction spell the defeat of any attempt to found a practical criticism upon them. They leave the critic with nothing at all to say about his text that is not immediately suspect of being a picture of his own intentions. But, in spite of that, deconstruction, like the other theories of the hour, strikes me as anything but a counsel of modesty. It is, I rather suspect, a positivism of a new sort, a methodology of the negative, which provides its adherents with novel and spectacular ways of being cocksure of themselves.

I sense the presence of forces at work within the culture that produces and consumes critical theories that are far more corrosive than anything that can be supplied by kibbitzing spectators like myself. The accelerated rhythm of avant-garde succession is doing far more to undermine whatever critical theory is now in the ascendant than all the broadside attacks that issue periodically from champions of critical realism, the most celebrated at the moment being Gerald Graff in his *Literature Against Itself*. (Things move so swiftly. In recent years I have seen the dominant trends in applied psychoanalysis go from orthodox Freudianism to a modified "object relations" theory to "subjective reading" to "transactive reading" to a breathless syncretism of French Freud and identity theory in which Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Heinz Lichtenstein and D.W. Winnicott all play starring roles as advanced theoreticians. You need roller skates to keep up.) In addition, the difficulty of applying certain theories, as opposed to celebrating them, is bound to place a limit on their continued growth. A reading of so recent an example of theory in action as the collection of essays by the Yale critics (Bloom, Hartman, de Man, Miller and Derrida), *Deconstruction and Criticism*, might lead one to conclude that the rousing polemics with which certain revolutionary ideas promote themselves may be unmatched by anyone's efforts to turn them to practical effect. Indeed, a reader of that anthology might well remark the discrepancy in those essays between the excitement stirred up by their styles of assertion and the relative banality of their findings. The unsympathetic reader may be forgiven for suspecting that the greater part of the appeal of some critics lies, not in their power

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to draw out the more elusive meanings in a work of literature, but in their rhetorical strategies for arousing envy in other critics.

The question I wish to pose here is one that strikes me as most pertinent to a conference sponsored by *Partisan Review*. Whatever happened to the tradition of criticism represented in *Partisan Review* that was probably the richest vein of criticism in America in this century? I think of it in Parrington's terms as "critical realism," and am conscious of using the word "criticism" in a double sense: first as interpretation and judgment, second as an adversary habit of mind, a posture of skepticism and challenge. The major critical realists were all dissenters who normally did their best work in a mood of revolt, if not downright belligerence. They were largely socialists in their political orientation, though that association cannot be pushed too far, since, as Irving Howe points out, writers of his generation often did their best work when their ideologies had begun to decompose.

In any case, as critics the critical realists were wholly in the world, if not entirely of it. As a point of philosophical conviction as well as of moral necessity, they assumed the continuity of art and society, and their criticism normally addressed the social forces that impinge upon the artist and art itself as a contingent form of behavior. As Van Wyck Brooks once crankily put the matter, "To think of literature as merely literary, as something that is derived from literature, seems to me utterly frivolous." Irving Howe now speaks of his own impatience with the merely literary: "To be a first-rate critic you need a first-rate mind, but not many first-rate minds are likely to be content for long simply to remain critics." How much literary criticism is to be found in the pages of *Dissent*? Does that not tell us that in the editors' judgment serious journalists have better things to do?

I say without intending to flatter Irving Howe that what appeals to me most about his temper of mind and the tradition in which he has placed himself is that they exclude so little. Howe despairs of a great deal, despair being a normal feature of critical realism, but he dismisses little out of hand as irrelevant to civilized understanding. Each of the major critical realists of our time had some version of this impatient catholicity; for all of them, literature was anything but merely literary. Edmund Wilson was the very exemplar of critical realism at its most restless and expansive. Was there anything at all that could not be brought into his range of fire and made to appear central to contemporary thought? It was as a model of sustained curiosity and thoroughness that he meant so much to the New York intellectuals in the 1940s, at just the moment when they had to cast off the partisan dogmatism of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their youth and ease their way into a new and vastly more complex age. A striking case in point was the ease with which the New York intellectuals made their peace with the New Critics in the 1940s, when so typical an urban Jewish writer as Delmore Schwartz went whoring after strange gods—Eliot and Pound—in the pages of *The Kenyon Review* and *The Southern Review* as regularly as ambivalent Agrarians like Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, ignoring for the moment a long history of crop failure in Manhattan, appeared in *Partisan Review*. Both retreating Trotskyists and wilting Agrarians turned out to be pragmatic dogmatists who recognized in each other formidable allies in the battle to rescue literature from more corrosive doctrines. If the sons of the ghetto could join forces with the sons of the plantation in defense of the "autonomy" of the literary text, was not everything possible?

How is it, then, that a critical tradition with such habits of pragmatism and ingenuity should now command so little attention in the academy and should seem, on the face of it, a backwater? For one thing, critical realism is no longer a movement. It no longer advances any new ideas about literature or conceptions of society. It arose and flourished in a period of growth and stress in America, when political and economic pressures demanded a sharpening of perception and an expansion of the frame of social ideas. Compared with its role in documenting and protesting the conditions of life early in this century, critical realism now seems played out as a social force. Of course the critic can work admirably without a movement; some of the best critical writing just now is done by book reviewers (such as Michael Wood, Marvin Mudrick, Robert Towers, and Roger Sale) whose observations can be penetrating and vivid and who are, after their apolitical fashion, heirs to the realist tradition. But at a time when there is little to advocate and little will to do so, such critics cannot speak for anything larger than themselves: a program, a movement, a new horizon of thought. Only feminists and aggrieved minorities are exempt from this predicament. In criticism now the sense of movement belongs entirely to the grand theorists, and though the bulk of what passes for structuralist or deconstructionist or Freudian or Marxist analysis is thin in both conception and style, it grows fat on the illusion of breaking new ground and rolling back, with great vigor, the frontiers of consciousness.

Moreover, as energy has passed from the independent journals and little magazines to the universities and academic journals, there has been a marked shrinking of the available space for views of literature

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that move outward from the text to culture and society. The vast expansion of subsidized academic publishing has fractured the literary readership into discrete and isolated professional units. It is indeed an irony of the current reign of grand theory that it appeals to a sentiment for unifying the world but is normally expressed in the piecemeal manner of what C. Wright Mills called "abstracted empiricism," demonstrating in essay after essay that theory can discover in a text whatever it predicted to be already there: a structure, the problematics of the text's own composition, an identity theme, a latent content. The life of the mind has never seemed more fragmented than at the moment, as dozens of "humanistic" theories compete for attention, each claiming to be *the* synthesis we've all been waiting for.

The key to the present situation in criticism, if we have to single one out, lies in its institutional life, for criticism not only exists *in* the academy but is decidedly *of* it as well. Yet of the major critical realists of recent generations, few were creatures of the university. They have been, by and large, writers first and, if they have had university connections, teachers second. With the exception of those New York intellectuals who established a base of operations at Columbia University in the 1930s and after—Meyer Schapiro, Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, F.W. Dupee, and Richard Chase—the writers in and about the *Partisan Review* circle in its heyday entered the university largely as an expedient, to support their careers as writers. They used the academy as a writer's colony with certain housekeeping duties. They did not seek to spread their influence by "turning out" graduate students. The influence they wielded through their writing was, by and large, what they wanted, but as the power of the little magazines for which they wrote began to wane, they sometimes discovered themselves left high and dry in their academic offices, alien dignitaries in a culture which honored their past achievements in the way that America honors the Indian and the buffalo. They became conspicuous appendages to their institutions, intellectuals-in-residence.

There are many reasons why the university has not always proven to be a happy environment for the generalist of ideas. His "methodology," such as it is, is likely to be a compound of intuition, sympathy, and a certain kind of social experience that has brought him into contact early in life with both hardship and books, social dilemmas and social ideas. His attitude toward education is likely to be passionate but unsystematic. His brand of learning does not always amount to a curriculum. In touch with the spirit of ideas and the best minds of his generation, he is nevertheless unlikely to have mastered the bibliogra-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

phy. He is learned in a piecemeal fashion, but may not have much to teach, since his subject is always, in a sense, himself. In an institution where the most successful practitioners, like accomplished pilots, use all the instruments, he still flies by the seat of his pants.

It is not to condemn the culture of learning in the university to observe that by its very organized nature—from seminar to semester to symposium to salary to seniority—it favors the efficient, the systematic, and the repetitive: whatever can be put into curricular shape and transmitted from professor to student with a minimum of noise. The popular teacher is likely to be one who has carved out a field and ordered it so that the student, after even a single semester, has the sense of having mastered something.

Canons of literature being enormous and history inexhaustible, it is theory that now comes closest to making "English" a tractable subject. It is often said of the New Criticism that its power came from having made English teachable in the university. Its famous additions to the common lexicon of poetic tropes—irony, tension, paradox, structure, symbol, myth, rhythm, ambiguity—could be employed as a checklist of interpretative possibilities. The critic could become an expert in seven or seventeen types of ambiguity or symbolism or structure or motif and never run short of things to say. The basic terminology and rules of application could be learned in fifteen weeks, after which the critic would never again be at a loss to know "how a poem means." By contrast, the student who sets out to master a major body of literature or a historical period finds himself greatly disadvantaged in having taken on a limitless regimen of study. The grueling work of reading one hundred novels or tackling the Renaissance does not pay off nearly so handsomely as the ability to perform a brilliant exegesis upon a single text by the rules of some favorite scheme of interpretation. Theory outflanks scholarship by allowing the initiate to get by on performance alone. In our present situation, in which graduate educations tend to be brief, teaching positions scarce, and publication almost *de rigueur* for even the graduate student, closed systems yield a better return on one's investment of time than open ones.

Thus, despite vast differences in metaphysical orientation, the reigning critical theories occupy the place once held by the New Criticism. Each promotes a metaphysic of "the real," a procedure for unmasking appearances to expose the true nature of things, a finite and transmissible litany of assumptions, and a corrosive power to simplify complex ideas by identifying the primitive, basic strategies

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

behind them. Each also fosters its own style of writing badly as a sign of initiation. It is considerably easier to train students to write bad sentences of a particular, monotonous sort than to teach the difficult craft of style. Imagine trying to teach a class of graduate students to write—or to think—like Harold Rosenberg, and the appeal of the vague and portentous as a group style becomes immediately obvious. In any event, critics who operate exclusively in cénacles with no access to any larger marketplace of ideas and no particular desire to enter one have less need of style than of emblems of affiliation.

What we are witnessing presently is the hierarchy of intellect in action and an example of how ideas percolate down, like drip coffee, from the centers of influence in the major private universities. If the focus of semiotics and its affiliate disciplines were Montclair State College or Queens College, we'd hear precious little about it. A related feature of the social structure of "English" is its domination by a class of gentlemen scholars who ruled the profession largely without challenge until after the Second World War, when scholars of immigrant, working-class origin, especially Jews and Irishmen, gained admission and began to challenge certain prevailing notions of how the affairs of the mind are conducted. Not least among the unwritten laws they successfully overthrew was the notion that the exclusive subject of English is the literary history of England. Another is that learning and social class are closely linked, that one either enters English as a gentleman or, through exposure to the great documents of literature from *Piers Plowman* through *Paradise Lost,* learns to act the part. (So long as you earned a living at your job, however, you were just acting.) But despite this infiltration of alien elements, the mandarin class is still the backbone of the tenured English faculty in many major universities, and continues to set the tone of the profession. The insurgent edge of critical theory, I have been led to understand, has something to do with a belated revolt in certain institutions against the entrenched power of the old guard for whom English is still a realm of exclusive privilege. One would like to know more about these sentiments of rebellion among the younger scholars who have turned to theory, as well as about the degree to which they have taken on the colors of the enemy, adopting a mandarin exclusiveness of their own.

I am persuaded that the essential drama in the culture of academic literary study today is that of disaffected elements gathering force in sanctuaries outside departments of English—in French and comparative literature departments, writing programs, humanities centers—in an effort to outflank them as one outflanks a superior force that cannot

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be met head on. If there is anything at all in the condition of criticism at the moment that is lively, it is this underlying social drama, which is far more vital than the ideas through which it is being played out.

IRVING HOWE: Mark Shechner referred to what we call my old gang. I never felt part of it, but now that it no longer exists, I seem to become more and more fused with it. That's part of the necessary distortion of history; that there was a notable lack of self-reflection is partly true, but only in regard to a theory of criticism. There, we made no contributions. But there was a very great deal of self-criticism, of self-tormenting, nail-biting, questioning, arguing, fighting, error, judgment; because we—whoever that might be, I guess by now it's William and me—didn't think of ourselves primarily as critics, but as writers who sometimes did criticism. This does not make one better or worse, but it's a difference. We became engaged in issues and problems, and the question of how to respond to and how to analyze and describe, for example, Stalinism, or the big controversy over Hannah Arendt's book on Eichmann which, were it not for us, the rest of the country would have found a very stimulating book and then gone back to sleep. We became engaged with problems like Vietnam, the New Left, all kinds of other political, cultural, and social things. We were different, you see, from those who do theories of criticism. Now, about not fending off the avant-garde (the French avant-garde, etc.), here I can only speak for myself. It doesn't interest me much. That's a simple fact. Maybe I'm wrong in feeling that, or it's a sign of getting older. But I have now lived through several dominant critical theories which I was told were absolutely essential to my understanding. There was once a great critic in Chicago named Leo Aristotle, and if one didn't get clear what he was up to it was thought to be impossible to proceed one step further.

BARBARA ROSE: Does anybody here read any art criticism?

IRVING HOWE: I do. I read Hilton Kramer every week. I have many differences with Hilton on political and social matters. But I was deeply interested and stirred by his essay on Picasso, because he did something for me which is the job of the critic. He took certain impressions, unformulated responses that I've had somewhere in the back of my consciousness and hadn't been able to formulate because I lack the skill in art. He is not necessarily right in any particular judgment, but he did a service for me at that particular moment.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: Barbara, I think, is making a different point, Irving. She's saying that Hilton Kramer, with whom one doesn't always agree, represents an intelligence that goes beyond purely formal criticism. He's involved in the whole culture and the whole society in which we live, in the way that Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were. They were involved in the same questions you were, but they wrote about art.

BARBARA ROSE: Greenberg and Rosenberg, like Hilton Kramer, came from literary backgrounds. Art criticism was once thought to be a form of writing. It is significantly less than that today. It is not a form of literature, with the exception perhaps of Hilton Kramer, who I think has the distinction of being the last art critic.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: I'm told that Hilton Kramer is in the audience. Since you've been praised, do you want to get up and make some self-criticisms?

IRVING HOWE: Or do you want to attack us for praising you?

HILTON KRAMER: I just want to raise a question about Barbara's reference to Baudelaire's criticism. Is today's readership of criticism and reviewing inferior in terms of knowledge and sensibility, to the bourgeois readers whom Baudelaire so profoundly despised? I don't think our readers are more stupid than those readers. But there are more of them. We have not addressed the change that has occurred in the conditions of criticism, the conditions of readership, with this vastly enlarged educated public.

BARBARA ROSE: *The New York Times* is a special case. Its readership has a certain cultural level which is not identical to that of the culture at large. It is not even identical to that of the public of the art magazines, most of whom buy the magazines to look at the pictures.

HILTON KRAMER: I was really not referring to *The Times* as such. Occasionally even publications like *The New York Review of Books* or *Partisan Review* address the subject.

IRVING HOWE: In my paper, Hilton, when I spoke of the literary critic and criticism, I also meant reviewing. I don't believe, and I suspect you would agree with me, that there is some kind of Chinese wall between literary criticism and reviewing. I remember in the late forties, John Berryman published a brilliant review, in *Partisan Review*, of course, of a book by a lamentable critic named Maxwell Geismar. Geismar attacked T.S. Eliot for never having written anything except reviews. And Berryman argued that the most gifted and influential critic of the time had indeed done what we would call "review essays." Even the constrictions of space can sometimes be a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

decided advantage to the critic. They force you to be terse and concise and not to spread yourself out. At the very least they limit the number of mistakes you can make.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: How many art critics or art reviewers are there of the stature of earlier figures? Has there been a decline or a disappearance of the genre?

HILTON KRAMER: There has been a very serious decline in the writing of art criticism.

BARBARA ROSE: I'm glad we agree about something.

HILTON KRAMER: It relates to the decline of literary criticism and criticism generally. Unless one understands the New Criticism and what is now called the New Art Criticism as a response to the great masterpieces of modernist literature, one simply doesn't know what the function of this criticism was. It came into existence to answer the need for an understanding of a very difficult body of literary art. That was what gave Clement Greenberg his important function as an art critic. But neither our literature nor our art today really requires this criticism. You are not going to have a return to the kind of high seriousness in criticism you once had until the literature and art requiring it come into existence.

PETER BROOKS: It certainly is true, as Hilton Kramer says (and it has been said during the conference before), that the attempt to deal with and propagate the ideals of literary modernism which served as an impetus for criticism of about twenty or thirty years ago, has been lost. What's taken its place is a feeling of a void underneath the critical discourse, and therefore a groping for the grounding of one's judgments and analysis. And it's into this void that continental models of theory have penetrated. I see that as one of the reasons for their having caught on. So I really think it comes to the question of self-reflectiveness. If you feel that criticism can proceed even in the most journalistic sense without any self-reflectiveness, then you don't feel the need for a theory. But more and more practicing critics, as opposed to theoretical critics, are worried about the justification of their enterprise. Now what this has led to is not so much a sterility of criticism as a period of dubious battle.

IRVING HOWE: I think that the problem some of us see is not so much a lack of self-reflectiveness in literary criticism as a self-contained discipline. It may be true as you said, Peter, that some of us don't have this self-reflectiveness, and we simply have to plead guilty. But we have far greater sources of disturbance and uncertainty and querying about the culture as a whole. I don't know what we're

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

going to do, Hilton, we keep agreeing today. I would go along with what Hilton said, that we come after one of the greatest cultural movements in human history and we are now at the slough of this, and we don't know what's happening next. We have a sense of a vacuum, but it is not a vacuum in literary criticism. Criticism isn't that important. The problem is in the lives we lead, the culture we have, and the society in which we live.

BARBARA ROSE: The French are filling the vacuum with Freud. I just came back from Paris. It's quite amazing.

REUBEN ABEL: There's something about the discussion this afternoon that makes me feel that it is entirely wide of the mark.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: We were hoping nobody would notice that. But we are grateful that you did.

REUBEN ABEL: You can tell us about the economics of publishing, that the art magazines are now owned by the conglomerates. And we know that everybody is an artist now, and artists hate critics.

BARBARA ROSE: They don't hate them, they want to hire them!

REUBEN ABEL: We've heard about the political background of what's gone on. But no one has latched on to the critics' job. What is the critic primarily responsible for? I suggest that it is some sort of discrimination, some sort of evaluation or appraisal, some sort of saying this is good or this is bad. Now, the reason this is difficult to do is that the critic is expected to give a reason for his judgment.

IRVING HOWE: I was under the impression that I had said something like that in the course of my talk.

REUBEN ABEL: Your last reliance was on the word *intelligence*. Now intelligence is a great thing to have. But it is not enough.

IRVING HOWE: That's true. I said my last reliance was on intelligence, but I began my paper by talking about intuitive powers. The critic does have to give reasons for his evaluations. But all the theories that I know something about don't help us terribly much in the *act* of making our judgments. I pick up a new novel by a man named Naipaul, and I've got to try and figure out what I think about the book. Whatever it is that I do, none of the theories describes it. No one I know has ever tried to describe it. In terms of my actual job of work, when I ask myself why I think it's a good book, I have only the notoriously imprecise language of literary criticism, and there is only one language perhaps more notoriously imprecise, namely art criticism. A critical theory at times might enable me to avoid certain errors, or stimulate me to a keener perception of a given work. But finally I have to resort to my—I hope—trained sensibility.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DENIS DONOGHUE: I'd like to some extent to dissociate myself from the universal conclusion that literary criticism today is in some kind of appalling condition. It does not seem to me to be in such an appalling condition. It seems, rather, that we have critics at least as good as we deserve. As to Irving Howe's review of V.S. Naipaul's novel, I very much admire it. But that is not the question. A far more important question is: what process led to Irving Howe's being asked to review a new novel by one of the most famous novelists of our time, a book which doesn't need to be reviewed, because V.S. Naipaul is already famous. The crucial question is how do we discriminate, how do we say to readers, there are all of these novels or books of poems and the good ones—that really merit attention—are these. The process by which you render those judgments persuasive belongs to what I would call the rhetoric of criticism, or criticism as rhetoric, and of course Irving Howe does that better than anybody.

IRVING HOWE: Naipaul does not sell by the hundreds of thousands. He has sold very poorly. That's a very interesting fact about contemporary culture. I'm not giving away any trade secrets when I say that *The Times* asked me to review that book and arranged for an interview by Elizabeth Hardwick because one of the editors has a special passion for Naipaul's work. If you want to use our fantasy language, he was making a discriminating judgment and he wanted to do what he could to help that writer. There is a very complicated cultural issue surrounding Naipaul as a writer today. Some people feel that Naipaul is a son of a bitch who maligns the Third World, the hopes of various peoples, etc., and others feel that he confirms their crotchety prejudices. I don't think either side is right. As to why *I* was asked to do the review, I suppose the editor felt that things I had done in the past were more or less a preparation for it.

BARBARA ROSE: I'd like to say something about an effect of the mass media: anything you write is positive. I learned this lesson from Leo Castelli. He got a very bad review of some work by an artist he represented. I said, "You must feel terrible about this." He said, "Terrible? I feel wonderful." He took out a ruler and he measured the review, and he said, "Six inches; it's fantastic!" We must understand that the act of calling attention to something *is* the critical act at this point. I refuse to review at least nine out of ten of the books that are sent to me because they aren't even worth negative criticism.

MORRIS DICKSTEIN: I think that Denis Donoghue's question actually responds to a point made by Mark Shechner that happens in fact to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have been noted or responded to before. Mark mentions several things the critical realists or the New York intellectuals had not done. They did not develop a theory of criticism. Irving says the theory of criticism did not interest him. He considered himself only in some partial way a critic. And the other point that you made was that New York intellectuals, or the realists, never organized for power within the university.

IRVING HOWE: We felt that power was outside of the university!

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: Maybe we were wrong.

MORRIS DICKSTEIN: You felt that power was in *The New York Review of Books*, or in *Partisan Review*. I don't mean that you cunningly organized your career so that someday you'd be after a new Naipaul book. The New York intellectuals considered themselves writers rather than critics, they identified more with new art than they did with new criticism; their concerns were more cosmopolitan, more metropolitan; and they were in New York either physically or in spirit. New York even then, thirty years ago, was a kind of communications capital of the country. Even when the *Times* book review section was much more philistine and much more middle-brow than it subsequently became, the New York intellectuals reviewed frequently for it, because they were on the spot; they were intelligent, and they wrote extremely well.

IRVING HOWE: After my review of Naipaul came out—and this is perhaps the first time I've done it—I went to the publishers of his book and asked whether the sales had increased. It made almost no difference, and that's really depressing.

MORRIS DICKSTEIN: I think that sales are not the only thing. After that review Naipaul certainly became more of a presence among people who think about books and talk about books.

BARBARA ROSE: That's a very interesting distinction between literary and art criticism, because when Hilton writes a favorable review, and I know this for a fact, sales zoom.

HILTON KRAMER: While it is often true, it is just as often not true that, as you say, in writing these days for a prominent newspaper you have the power to do or to call attention to something. I know for a fact that many expositions that I've lavishly praised have gone their three-week stint without selling anything, while others that I have condemned to the lowest rung of hell have sold out over night.

BARBARA ROSE: But there is some correlation in the art world. I think Hilton Kramer does very well in *The New York Times*, but that is an extremely rare and privileged situation, and I presume that he has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arm-wrestled them into giving him as much space as he wants on Sunday to be able to explore a subject in some depth.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: I thought you were saying something else—that there is *almost* no serious art criticism, or very little, not that there's no forum for it.

JOHN CUDDIHY: Is not this sense of the belatedness of the great modern gone? We have no stick any longer with which to beat the bourgeoisie. We can't beat up on America any longer.

BARBARA ROSE: We *are* the bourgeoisie. What are you talking about?

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: Talk for yourself, Barbara. You write for *Vogue*—that's the bourgeoisie.

JOHN CUDDIHY: Part of the allure of structuralism is that it's filling a vacuum.

BARBARA ROSE: The allure of structuralism—the allure of semiotic analysis—is that it resolves the problem. You don't need great art to use it as a methodology. You can use it on fashion, on Bugs Bunny, on anything.

IRVING HOWE: Mr. Cuddihy's remarks are crude. Whatever we did or didn't do with Marx, and that's a subject for another occasion, we didn't use him as a stick with which to beat the moderns.

JOHN CUDDIHY: Not the moderns!

IRVING HOWE: The bourgeoisie.

JOHN CUDDIHY: The philistines!

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: We didn't use him as a stick to beat anybody.

IRVING HOWE: Thank you. We tried to understand the world. The question of the extent to which we succeeded or failed is another matter for another occasion. The sense of cultural difficulty at the moment has to do with the dispossession of Marx. Marx is all over the place, in a form I don't like. It's the academicized Marx, a kind of walking corpse, that one encounters these days. There are far deeper issues having to do with the gradual disintegration of the modernist impulse and the uncertainty as to what, if anything, comes afterward. The challenge to the very idea of valuation is deeply to be found in the whole culture, as well as the uncertainty as to what culture means at this particular historical moment.

HILTON KRAMER: Irving, we've at last found something to disagree on: something is either good or pretentious. If you no longer have the modernist aesthetic, or Marxism in some form as an instrument for bludgeoning philistine stupidity, then you do remove a good deal of the function of criticism for quite a few decades. That was more or less what Cuddihy was saying. And that is a simple, straightforward

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reading from the history of American criticism in this century. If you are going to revise that central antagonism between high-brow criticism based either on some form of Marxist alliance, Marxist commitment, or a commitment to modernism and, in the earlier days of *Partisan Review*, some synthesis or provisional alliance or assumed alliance between the two—if you're going to revise that out of existence, then we're dealing with fictional history.

IRVING HOWE: I don't want to revise it out of existence. I agree that the alliance between modernism and Marxism which was envisaged in the early days of *Partisan Review* was very problematical, certainly turned out to be very different from what we expected, and doesn't exist anymore. I don't consider myself a Marxist, certainly not in any orthodox way, except insofar as having lived in a particular moment it has left its imprint upon me. And the modernist thing is exhausted too, but it seems to me there are still plenty of grounds for the battle against philistinism. There are plenty of people in the culture in the past hundred and fifty years, here and in Europe, who fought against philistinism without being either Marxist or necessarily ideological partisans of modernism. I think we're in a kind of trough, a social/cultural dead moment. That doesn't mean there isn't good writing. My guess would be that there is just as much good writing done today as there was thirty or forty years ago. What you don't have is the sense of a coherent intellectual cultural atmosphere with some leading idea behind it which gives people energy. There is a job to be done. But we can't do it as a gang.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I've been sitting here for two days wondering why I don't feel this pessimism, why I don't feel that I live in a trough of culture and that nothing is happening. And I realize that to me, as a feminist, exactly the kind of criticism that Irving Howe proposes *is* being done. I feel that same kind of excitement in reading feminist writers and small feminist magazines that you people felt in the political developments of the thirties and sixties.

MARK SHECHNER: Feminism is the only political movement to come out of the sixties that maintains something of the force and the momentum of what politics had in the sixties, which in all other areas has totally dispersed.

LARRY NEAL:* That's not true. The other movement that came out of the sixties that still is vital and literate is the black arts movement. The theater movement is vibrant; there is a lot going on in black

*Larry Neal died while this issue of *Partisan Review* was going to press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poetry and art circles. I'm reading all of you guys, and none of you is reading us. There are a lot of exciting things in the black and feminist communities. I think one of the problems with this whole discussion is its New York orientation and its orientation towards the eastern university. The discussion is valuable, though it shows that there is a distinction between those actively engaged in these issues, the young people, and those in the critical establishment. You look at *Partisan Review* and you don't see many of the active young writers and poets being published. You look at *The New York Review of Books* which completely ignores black and Hispanic writers, and you wonder why you are having problems.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: Larry, you're now officially invited to write about what you say is being neglected.

BARBARA ROSE: I'm not black, but I'm female, so I feel that I can address myself to at least part of this problem. Certainly, feminists and black people have a sense of community, which we as apologists for modernism in one way or another no longer have. Now, the situation with black visual artists is particularly painful to me. There is a tremendous amount of energy, but because the visual arts are so predicated on an economic base, because there are no black collectors or critics or publications and the economic matrix isn't there, there is very little chance that the artists will be able to continue to evolve in a way which would yield a major figure. In literature, it is probably quite different because you don't require this gigantic economic matrix. With regard to feminism, I read the literature, and I look at the art. I try very hard to "get with it." With the exception of Juliet Mitchell and a very few others, I do not find that the writing, the analysis, the criticism are up to my cultural standards.

LARRY NEAL: Are you aware of *The Black Arts Quarterly*?

BARBARA ROSE: No, but I'd be delighted to have more information about it.

LARRY NEAL: As an example of what I am talking about: a few issues ago in *Partisan Review*, a chapter of Morris Dickstein's book on the sixties was printed, and it completely ignored the energies created in the sixties by blacks and the minority movements. There is no reference to the music of John Coltrane. There is no reference to the works of Baraka. You would never know that Ornette Coleman existed, that Ed Bullins or the black theater movement or the black poetry movement existed. Black people opened up more poetry to Americans in the sixties than any group at any other time.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: Larry, why don't you write such a piece?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MORRIS DICKSTEIN: I think this is what Barbara Rose was saying, that feminist criticism doesn't come up to certain levels, certain standards. Perhaps feminist critics, some of them very good, don't read much poetry. In your case, I think if you'd read my book on the sixties closely enough—

LARRY NEAL: I was referring to the chapter in *Partisan Review*. I haven't read the whole book.

MORRIS DICKSTEIN: There is a chapter in my book which includes a discussion of a number of black writers and intellectuals including yourself and LeRoi Jones, and which is very sympathetic in some ways and very critical in others.

HILTON KRAMER: In all the claims to the lack of attention that the establishment is denying the feminist writers or black writers, the enormous amount of attention *The New York Times* lavishes on *all* of them is never mentioned.

IRVING HOWE: I might add, Hilton, even the excessive praise *The New York Times* gives.

HILTON KRAMER: Yes.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: And the National Endowment for the Arts gives a lot of money to them. I am reluctant to end this discussion without resolving all of the questions raised. But we have already run over our time. I want to thank the participants, the audience, and the New School, as well as those whose contributions helped make this meeting possible.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova

INSIDE THE KREMLIN

The existence and coexistence of different factions, the struggle among them, and the constant shakeups within the Politburo make it possible to regard the Soviet system as a multiparty one, even though the plurality of parties is manifested only on an elitist level and has nothing to do with (indeed, has no need of) such mechanisms as elections. Yet most of the decisions made at the top are not arbitrary. Rather, they reflect the political mood of the ruling elite and the ideological shifts in the society. In the Soviet Union, along with at least three main focuses of power (the Politburo, the top military echelon, and the top echelon of the KGB), there exists an ideological apparatus which is one of the most unusual fruits of the totalitarian system. Newspapers, magazines, and books whose printings run into many millions—the prestige and magic of the printed word in a semiclosed society—and the fact that the country is entirely covered by the radio and television network—these things transform that apparatus from a tool of the regime into one that is relatively autonomous.

The ideological apparatus functions on two fronts: as a medium through which the regime influences the people and as one through which the people influence the regime. For example, the new upsurge of national chauvinism and anti-Semitism began in the press. Only afterward did the authorities pick up on it, and make it a matter of official policy. Until 1977 and the fall of Podgorny, the most important battles had taken place within the Politburo, where the hard core neo-Stalinists were in a minority, and were gradually put *hors de combat.* Once Carter's rhetorical campaign against the USSR got under way, however, there was a sharp increase in external pressure on the Politburo from the KGB and the armed forces, which had been given an ideological fillip by the nationalist neo-Stalinist party. In other words, it was the ideological apparatus which, with the help of the KGB and the armed forces, brought about an abrupt swing to the right.

It is becoming more and more obvious, then, that the power struggle is moving beyond the confines of the Politburo—a fact which

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

puts the American Kremlin observers in a somewhat nonsensical position. Even if they do manage to discover Brezhnev's heir within the Politburo, for example, he is hardly likely to outlive his predecessor for long. With the possible exception of the Leningrad Party boss, Romanov, that heir will probably be a mere fill-in. His behavior will be determined by external circumstances. The empire has its own defensive tasks, due to the constant threat of its collapse, and any Soviet leader is going to try to carry them out with a minimum of subjective deviations. It seems to us, therefore, that to separate the study of the Kremlin from the study of the Soviet Union as a whole is a methodological error.

If, with respect to the future of Russia, we want to make use of analysis rather than fortune-telling or prophecy, we must envisage possible political changes in the light of ideological shifts. Since political changes are preceded and determined by ideological trends, we shall begin by examining the ideological trends of the seventies. From these trends, the political complexion of Russia in the eighties should emerge.

It was in the seventies, after the pragmatic and (for Russia) liberal Khrushchev era and during Brezhnev's bureaucratic and ideologically neutral regime, that the doctrinal gap in the structure of the Russian empire began once more to be filled in with a great-power ideology. The gradual switchover from communist slogans to their national-chauvinist counterparts can be discerned in the publications (some of them astounding) of the official Soviet press—a press which, with a few exceptions like *Pravda,* is almost totally ignored by American politicians, scholars, and journalists. It is rather as if Theseus were flatly to refuse the spool of thread proffered him by Ariadne before he entered the labyrinth.*

The decade of the seventies was one of political stability combined with fast-breaking (by Russian standards) ideological change—from a

*Every month, the magazine *World Press Review* (formerly *Atlas*) carries a special page devoted to the Soviet press, adapting articles from *Pravda, Izvestiya, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Sovetskaya Rossiya,* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*—precisely those Potemkinesque periodicals which are intended for Western consumption and hence are strict and specific in their choice of materials. The result is that the West receives only those signals specifically directed toward it and does not take its bearings from other signals—more typical and more important—beamed toward domestic readers. So it is that the only peephole into the mysterious world of Soviet politics that might enable one to surmise future political trends is being ignored.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pro forma communist ideology to an impulsive, nationalistic one. What caused that contradiction? Was it not only an apparent one, since ideology is usually a forerunner of politics, and determines it? Is not Brezhnev's position as Chief of State merely nominal and symbolic? What if the immutable Brezhnev were only an optical illusion, a facade, a screen behind which—especially in the late seventies—drastic, irreversible political changes were taking place? What if while everyone was expecting those changes to take place after Brezhnev's departure from the political scene they were in fact taking place while he was still on stage and, thanks to him, were invisible to the outside observer? Finally, what if Brezhnev, despite his frail health, were to outlive the Brezhnev era?

In the seventies, intense ideological struggle determined the structure of the political balance of power in Russia. Inevitably, that balance had to be upset by the predominance of one of the ideological parties, so that the colorless interlude of the Brezhnev administration could finally take on some coloration, and the period of stagnation become a full-fledged era. Our task is to bring out this latent struggle, so that the victors and the vanquished emerge clearly into view. To that end, we must analyze both domains of power in the USSR—the political *and* the ideological. In comparison with the scanty information available about the former, information about the latter is both abundant and ignored.

The political endurance of the tottering Brezhnev may seem perplexing. He bears his "fateful burden" of power with amazing obstinacy, like the toy soldier in Andersen's fairy tale; or like those real-life Japanese soldiers who went on fighting against an invisible enemy long after their country had surrendered to that enemy and had even managed to make friends with it. In 1977, when we were still in the Soviet Union, officials from the Central Committee, giving secret lectures at research institutes, were critical of Brezhnev's ideological concessions and diplomatic compromises and his "protecting the Zionists who had infiltrated the institute of America under the wing of Arbatov." The charge was repeated in a pamphlet printed on a rotary press (with whose permission?) and widely circulated in both capitals in 1979. It was signed, "The Russian Liberal Movement," and its authors named Kosygin, Suslov, and Romanov as the only real Russians in the Politburo, which (they said) was dominated by a group of Zionists headed up by Brezhnev. But Brezhnev managed to remain in power because, unlike Khrushchev, he prizes political power more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than political ideas, and has no qualms about sacrificing the latter to the former. His tactic is quite simple: once he has vanquished a political opponent personally, he yields to him ideologically, making a compromise with that opponent's political leanings. For example, after removing the most zealous Stalinists from the Politburo, Brezhnev himself brought the ship of state back to the Stalinist course. Thus, the six counterrevolutions carried out by Brezhnev during his rule (approximately one every two years) were at the same time a rebirth of the regime—its internal transformation.

By the eighties, of those members of the old Politburo who in the "Little October" of 1964 overthrew Khrushchev, only two remained along with Brezhnev: Suslov and Kirilenko. Of the six who were expelled, four—Shelepin, Shelest, Polyansky, and Podgorny—were hawks. To them should be added others who were removed from their posts and who, although not members of the Politburo, were nonetheless influential political bigwigs: Sergei Pavlov, the Komsomol chief and Vasily Tolstikov, the Leningrad Party boss and an alternate member of the Politburo, for example.

Alexander Shelepin was called "Iron Shurik" ("Shurik" being a diminutive of "Alexander"). He tried to extend to the whole country the methods used by the KGB, which he had once headed up, invoking the necessity for discipline and a strong regime. He himself called his movement the "Workers' Opposition." What he wanted, and fought for, was a retreat from the bureaucratic dictatorship and a return to a dictatorship of the proletariat and pure socialism. And he was ready to lead a crusade against the pro-Western Jews and intellectuals-turned-bourgeois. His fall was as meteoric as his rise to power: he went from First Secretary of the Komsomol to Chairman of the KGB to Secretary of the Central Committee (combined with membership in the Presidium) to Trade Union Chairman. The last named was merely a nominal post; but he could not hang onto it, and he fell into oblivion. His ambition was boundless; his character was truly iron-like; and he had almost total control over the KGB and key Party posts as well. Getting rid of him was Brezhnev's greatest achievement.

Dealing with the others was easier. Shelepin's protégé, Sergei Pavlov, when head of the Komsomol, tried to transform it into something like the *Hitlerjugend.* But with no Hitler around, this meant he was overreaching his real authority to a dangerous extent. His usual response to official criticism was that the Komsomol was the Party's guard dog and should run on ahead of its master. He was removed from his post when he tried to introduce special uniforms for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Komsomol, and to form elite units of storm troopers from among his Blackshirts.

Dmitri Polyansky's position was directly opposed to Shelepin's. Against the "workers" banner hoisted by Shelepin, Polyansky raised a "peasants" banner. At any rate, such was the coloration of his chauvinist nationalism and reactionary views. By an ironical twist that one can ascribe either to fate or to the rivals that overcame him, his first demotion was to the position of Minister of Agriculture, the most hopeless and demeaning slot in the Soviet hierarchy. Then he was sent into honorable exile—as Ambassador to Japan. His neighbor in the Orient, Vasily Tolstikov, was sent as Ambassador to China because he had taken too much power into his own hands in Leningrad. He was trying, it seems, to be more of a royalist than the king himself.

Podgorny was a member not only of the Politburo but of its nucleus, the triumvirate; and he was at least the third most important person in the state that he officially headed. (Brezhnev himself replaced him as Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet.) Podgorny was removed from all his posts immediately after his trip to Africa, when he tried to make Soviet policy even more harsh and extremist than it already was—something that ran counter to détente and put a heavy strain on the Soviet budget besides. (Apparently, he had tried to oust Brezhnev: the anti-Brezhnev lectures we have mentioned were given shortly before Podgorny's fall.)

Finally, Pyotr Shelest, the Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, was the chief architect of the occupation of Czechoslovakia. (The chief one, that is, among the Soviet politicians: Walter Ulbricht also played a leading role in that decision.) Shelest's aggressive style—his *Sturm und Drang*—is described in the memoirs of Joseph Smrkovsky, one of the prime movers of the "Prague Spring."

Of those Politburo members who voted for the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops (rumor has it that at the Politburo session the motion was carried by a simple majority of two), only one remains: Leonid Brezhnev. The difference between him and the "fallen angels" is a matter of circumstance: the responsibility of political power restrains his natural political impulses. He is a hawk, but one that has been trained: when necessary, he knows how to behave like a dove. Such is the pattern (in our time, at any rate): when the extremists get into power, they become pragmatists—like Menachem Begin or Robert Mugabe.

Yet Brezhnev's transformation was somewhat different: in him, the bureaucrat suppressed the Stalinist. It is easy to imagine what the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

political policy of the Soviet Union would have been if the other Stalinists had managed to keep their places in Kremlin's top echelon: Afghanistan would have been invaded, not on the eve of the eighties, but a decade earlier. The Politburo, as constituted in the seventies, was a barrier to the Stalinists' drive toward power—a fragile barrier that was shaken by many blows. Hence the regular, repeated attempts to dislodge the Brezhnev apparatus. Hence, also, the inevitable, steadily progressing regeneration of that apparatus.

Victory is internal transformation. The centrists' victory over the Stalinists was possible only because the centrists themselves were on an unswerving course of Stalinization. Such is the paradoxical nature of labile compromise in the Kremlin: the right-wing extremists are removed from the top echelon, while the top echelon itself steadily becomes more right-wing. The conqueror, once he has triumphed, turns out to have been vanquished. And he who has been vanquished triumphs.

The pallor of the Brezhnev era, then, is illusory. The changes taking place in that era are latent, and will appear later on. By the late seventies Brezhnev was scarcely capable of a struggle for power, and certain backstage individuals desperately strove to keep a physically and politically feeble leader in power, so as to bar "mysterious newcomers" from access to the Kremlin. Judging from the stiffening of Soviet foreign and domestic policy, by the late seventies those mysterious newcomers had nonetheless managed to achieve a decisive preponderance, shifting the unstable equilibrium of power in their favor. The transfer of power from the sclerotic hands of the Politburo members into the strong hands of the newcomers has not yet been completed. The Potemkinesque facade of the Brezhnev administration is still useful both to the conservative apparatchiks who are clinging to vestiges of power, and to the mysterious newcomers, who prefer a gradual and steady regeneration of power to a coup d'état, which would still be a risky thing.

But are those mysterious newcomers all that mysterious, really? In Moscow they are called "the iron young men"; and we can get an idea of what their political behavior in the eighties will be like by taking a look at the ideological changes that preceded, and paved the way for, their advent to power.

"Scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tatar." Lenin adapted this French saying to his own times and his Party entourage: "Scratch a Russian Communist and you'll find a great-power chauvinist." But Stalin didn't even have to be scratched: his communism faded away like a suntan in winter. None of the other Russian leaders was such a gung

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ho chauvinist as the Georgian, Iosif Djugashvili. We shall not try, here, to guess at the drive to which this can be attributed (whether, for instance, it was a national inferiority complex sublimated into the great-power nationalism of another people or a feeling of responsibility toward the Russian imperial tradition).

At the outset, the Russian Revolution seemed to have achieved its goal when it overthrew the Russian empire. Almost all of the peoples who made up the empire—Poles, Finns, Ukrainians, the peoples of the Baltic littoral, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—fled from that "prison of peoples," as Lenin called it. It cost Stalin a great deal of labor to bring all those prodigal sons back under the constraining shelter of the paternal roof. It was not for nothing that the official propagandists called him "the father of peoples." It would take a psychoanalyst rather than a historian to explain the attitude toward him of the subjugated peoples (including the Russians). Was Stalin an anomaly in Russian history? Or was he summoned forth by Russian history as a counterweight to those destructive revolutionary forces that were inimical to it? In any case, it was under his hegemonic dictatorship that the Russian Revolution countermarched, destroying its own model *en route.*

The Revolution and the Civil War in Russia were not so much political struggles as fights among heirs at the bedside of a dying man. And perhaps it was not even the identity of the heir that was at issue, but the nature of the heritage. Perhaps if the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries, or even the Cadets had been in the place of the Bolsheviks, they would have behaved like Bolsheviks, under the ideological and political pressures of Russian history. After all, even though when the Bolsheviks were in the opposition they clamored for Russia's defeat in the imperialist wars, once they got into power they waged such wars no less successfully than their predecessors had. When Stalin was still alive, the Russian philosopher, Georgy Fyodotov wrote that Stalin deliberately built his power structure on his heritage from the Russian czars and atamans. And he added: "The ideas of the Black Hundreds triumphed in the course of the Revolution, and they will no doubt outlive us."

The context in which Stalin now appears in novels, poems, memoirs, and journalistic writings is significant. That context is either World War II, when Stalin—as Solzhenitsyn accurately put it—discarded the rotten scaffolding of ideology and unfurled the old Russian banner, or it is Russian history more generally. The following excerpt is from a poem published in the early seventies—a time when Stalin was still appearing in literature incognito, under the transparent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mask of the man holding a pipe that has gone out and wearing soldier's boots:

> In all ages, when things were going hard,
> The country was ruled by stern men
> Who loved it with all their might.
> In the crowd, mutinous men and enemies crossed themselves
> When on the block, chopped-off heads
> Obscenely cursed the Czar—the "Little Father. . . ."
> Only the centuries proved those stern men right.
> With their field-glasses, pipe in hand,
> Wearing jackboots or soldier's boots,
> They stand there in the history of the empire.

One should not overestimate the importance of Stalin's rehabilitation in Soviet publications of the seventies. Neo-Stalinism is not an end in itself but merely one of the means employed in the current ideological revolution: it is the nearest historical example that is positive within the context of this campaign. Much more significant is the promotion of Stalin from the ranks of the Bolshevik revolutionaries to a different historical—and hence semantic—rank: that of the autocratic czars. In the poem quoted above, which also mentions Ivan the Terrible and Alexander Nevsky, the jackboots and field-glasses belong to Peter the Great. If we do a bit more decoding of the poem's subtext, we can see that the author insists on the *historical* rightness of those bloodthirsty tyrants. Their deeds, he tells us, were not entirely understandable to their unfortunate contemporaries, but they should be lauded by a grateful posterity.

Paul Valéry once noted that in a totalitarian state, history is politics' most faithful servant and the chief source of chauvinism. Current Russian historical propaganda offers many striking proofs of that observation. Today writers in all genres are doing a job of historical restoration, singing the praises of the glorious Russian past, including Russian feats of arms in conquering foreign territories—although only yesterday those wars were recognized as predatory. The magazine *Znamya* regularly prints essays on the glory of Russian arms, stressing the continuity between the czarist and the Soviet armed forces—even though previously, except during World War II, the two were strongly contrasted.

Needless to say, this about-face also affects those historical figures who took up arms against the "prison of peoples" in the past century and were, until very recently, counted among the bravest of autocracy's enemies. For example, Shamil and Haji-Murat, leaders of Moslem rebellions in the Caucasus, are now being accused of pernicious separatism and bourgeois nationalism. Again, the Russian language

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

newspaper, *Kommunist Tadzhikistana*, which is published in a Soviet republic adjacent to Afghanistan, has issued an appeal (February 1, 1980) that schoolchildren be taught "not only to love, but to hate"—an appeal of the wartime variety. And at whom is it aimed? At the Afghan rebels, as one naive American journalist has concluded in *The New York Times* (March 8, 1980)? But Soviet troops are dealing with those rebels. No, the target is Enemy Number One, the fear of whom is taking on catastrophic proportions in the Soviet Union. That enemy is of course China.

We want to specify, first of all, that this is a *Russian* fear—one not equally shared by natives of the Central Asian republics. Indeed, the exclamation "The Chinese will come and give you what's for!"—one that we ourselves have heard on quite a few occasions—has become a commonplace in squabbles between those natives and Russians. For that matter, the latter are doing their bit, too. What with the lack of Chinese in Moscow, the Russians are mistaking other visiting Asiatics for Chinese. A Buryat who had come to Moscow for a few days tells how he was approached in the subway by a drunk who shouted at him: "Chink!" And this time the other Russians, who are traditionally compassionate toward drunks, took the side of the boozer and for patriotic reasons. A few years ago such scandalous behavior would have been possible only vis-à-vis a Jew. Could it be that the Russians are replacing everyday anti-Semitism and official anti-Zionism with anti-Sinoism?

On the ideological level, that process is already taking place, which is why we have slighted the theme of anti-Semitism. Needless to say, the current ideological revolution *began* with the anti-Semitism of the seventies, as these items suggest: A sympathetic quotation from the Nazi ideologue Werner Zombart in the mass magazine *Ogonyok* (1974, No. 42); a reference to Alfred Rosenberg's book, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, as the second most important Nazi propaganda document after *Mein Kampf* (*Moskva*, 1976, No. 5); the "discovery" of a world-wide Jewish plot against prerevolutionary Russia, with the court favorite, the "holy devil" Grigory Rasputin, as cat's-paw (*Nash Sovremennik*, 1979, Nos. 4–7); a similar plot against postrevolutionary Russia, with Leon Trotsky acting as the cat's-paw and telling his fellow conspirators: "We must play the role of the cancerous tumor in the body of Russia."

But this thrust of great-power nationalism was doomed to diminish in scope and, by the late seventies, to yield to other ideological thrusts more vitally important to the empire. On a steadily increasing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scale, the Jews are being replaced by the Chinese as ideological bogeymen and scapegoats. The devices developed for anti-Semitic purposes were now used against the Chinese. For example, a new use was made of the main weapon employed in Stalin's campaign against the "cosmopolites": the "exposure of pseudonyms," whereby the official propagandists discovered, behind the facade of Russian pseudonyms, the real, Jewish names of the "cosmopolites." In books and articles about Cambodia, it was especially emphasized that the former premier, Pol Pot, had concealed his real name, Salot Sar, and his origins. (His mother was Chinese.)

In late 1979 the magazine *Novyi Mir* published the famous Marshal Chuikov's memoirs about four trips he made to China on orders from Stalin and the meetings he had there with communist and Kuomintang leaders. Chuikov's account is a memoir in name only. Actually, it is a warning of inevitable war with a dangerous enemy; and its tone is hardly triumphant. "China is invincible," Chiang Kai-Shek said to him early in 1941. "For China, war is only an illness; and illnesses run their course. . . ." When Chuikov objected that "some of them are fatal," the response was: "No! We don't believe that they cause death. Death is not an illness: it comes as something separate."

The reasons for Chiang Kai-Shek's enigmatic optimism are to be sought, not in the philosophy of Confucius, and not in the poetry of Tu Fu, but in some remarks by his chief political rival, Mao Tse-Tung. In Moscow, during the anti-Stalinist Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, the Israeli Communist leader, Samuil Mikunis reports in his memoirs that Mao's favorite topic of conversation was World War III, which he regarded as inevitable. Mao, he tells us, was convinced that one had to be ready for it at any moment; and he thought only in terms of that war, as if it had already begun.

"Nehru and I," he said, "have been having a little argument as to how many people will be killed in an atomic war. Nehru says a billion and a half, but I say only a billion and a quarter." At this point Palmiro Tagliatti asked him: "And what will happen to Italy as a result of such a war?" Mao looked at him intently, then replied coolly: "Who told you Italy has to exist? There'll be three hundred million Chinese left, and that's enough to keep the human race going."*

*Samuil Mikunis, "Insight" (*Time and We*, 1979, No. 48, p. 165). Similar remarks by Mao—with some slight variations—have been recorded by other memoirists. In an article titled "Peking's Hidden Concepts," (*Znamya*, 1979, no. 12, pp. 222-233) the Soviet journalist Ernst Henry has brought together a slanted selection of them, including the famous one recorded by Edgar Snow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It may be that China's demographic invulnerability is considerably exaggerated in Moscow: fear makes mountains out of molehills. But even if we are dealing here with that "false imagination" that Plato talks about in the *Timaeus*, the fact remains that this fear determines the Russian state of mind on all levels of consciousness. (Among the many defeatist jokes going the rounds in Moscow, the shortest one is: "All is quiet on the Chinese-Finnish border.") The recent and still painful memory of the many millions of lives lost in World War II plus the inevitable parallels—both historical and ethnic—with the three hundred-year Tatar occupation intensify the feeling of a threat to the empire's existence. And the Russians take this to be a threat to their own existence as a nation, since they have no experience of any other form of state but the empire.

It is hard to find anything to compare with the latter. The Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Third Reich—none of these is a precedent. The only historical analogy is with the Ottoman Empire, which under the threat of collapse also resorted to stepping up its military might, its internal discipline, and its great-power nationalism (Pan-Islamism, Ottomanism, Pan-Turkism, and the butchery of the Armenians). A direct parallel can be established between the present Russian nationalists and the Young Turks of the early twentieth century: like the former, the latter tried to save the empire in the belief that they were saving the nation. Ultimately, Turkey almost lost everything that had made it a state: it took the route—one which was humiliating yet proved to be its salvation—from empire to nationhood. Is it possible for Russia to take such a course? Not voluntarily, needless to say: this would be interpreted by the Russians as regression by the state—as the road back to national humiliation and annihilation. Thus all centrifugal trends (the attempts made in this direction by Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia) have been nipped in the bud. But with the help of China? What would the Russian nation be like if it were not burdened down—territorially, politically, and economically—by its empire? Alas, any analogy has a limited range of application: one can compare the past with the past or with the present, but that is all. Ultimately, the Ottoman Empire collapsed as the result of that great earthquake known as World War I. Its epicenter was relatively far away; but its last shock wave reached Istanbul, and that sufficed. In the present situation, things are different. Russia itself is impatient for a war, regarding it as something inevitable, defensive, and preventive—so long as China has now grown out of its atomic diapers. Even the aspirations of the subjugated nations are now being taken by the Russians, within the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

context of the Chinese threat, as an encroachment upon their national, state, and territorial integrity. Their fear of China is, if you will, the sinner's fear of the Last Judgment sublimated as a fear of disappearing as a nation.

Given the ethnic isolation of the Russians within the boundaries of their own empire, the fear of China is a factor which serves very well in uniting and inspiring the Russians, and in justifying various measures taken by the regime. That fear is no doubt largely responsible for the stiffening of the USSR's foreign and domestic policies and for the ideological revolution now taking place in the country. Incidentally, one of the first to call for such a revolution was Solzhenitsyn, who in his "Letter to the Soviet Leaders" (1973) advised them to switch from a communist to a nationalist ideology, in view of an impending war with China. Today, with the nation in a hazardous situation, Stalin seems almost the ideal model for behavior. In this context, the seizure of Afghanistan looks like a smaller, milder version of the war with China, or like a prelude to it—a warming-up exercise for stale troops before the big battle. For a preventive war with China is a temptation that the Soviet leaders have constantly had to overcome—and one that will ultimately prove impossible to overcome.

The French parliamentary leader, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, was the only Western politician who managed to have a meeting with Brezhnev in January 1980, shortly after the Soviet blitzkrieg in Afghanistan. According to a report in the British newspaper, *The Daily Mail* (January 29, 1980), Brezhnev kept changing the subject from Afghanistan to China: "Believe me, after the destruction of Chinese nuclear sites by our missiles, there won't be much time for the Americans to choose between the defense of their Chinese allies and peaceful co-existence with us."

We have no way of checking the accuracy of this quotation. The French politician said nothing in public about his meeting with Brezhnev; and his office refused to comment on the article in *The Daily Mail*. We can, however, confirm Brezhnev's remarks indirectly, through the Soviet press. Since that press is censored, it can be compared to the tip of an iceberg, by which one can judge the magnitude of the issues being repressed. And just as one's eyes are stung by the brilliance of an iceberg's tip glittering in the sun, one is staggered by the outspoken, sensational things said concerning China in the Soviet press. Just one week after the invasion of Afghanistan, the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura* (an organ of the Central Committee) published a historical article full of topical allusions by the well-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

known Russophile writer, Valentin Rasputin, which contained the following out-and-out militaristic warning: "Is Fate not bringing closer to us the time when we shall again go forth onto the Field of Kulikovo to defend Russian soil and Russian blood?"

In Russian history, the battle of Kulikovo between the Russians and the Tatars is rated as one of the greatest—on a par with Borodino in 1812 and Stalingrad in 1942. The Russians see Kulikovo not as a battle between states but as one between races and continents. Although it took place six hundred years ago, the Russians are quite sure it will have to be fought again in the near future.

The anniversary number of the "thick" journal *Nash Sovremennik* contained a poem about the campfires lighted on Kulikovo Field, "which have still not been damped down with ashes":

> I cast an anxious gaze toward the East,
> And an equally anxious one toward the West.
> I fear that tomorrow we shall set out
> Along a road lighted by campfires.
> Who is ready to lead us in this campaign?
> Are the young princes yet in the saddle?

In the Soviet Union today, people are yearning not for the dead Stalin but for new Stalins, the "young princes" who are openly contrasted with the Kremlin gerontocrats in the Soviet press. Novels, novellas, articles, poems, scholarly studies, entire issues of magazines—all this fuss about the sixth centennial of Kulikovo has marked a new upsurge of nationalist chauvinism and militaristic propaganda. It looks as if the "young princes" were not just getting into the saddle but have been there for some time already, waiting for the trumpet to sound the charge and summon them to defend the Russian empire against both East and West—Afghans and Poles, Chinese and Americans, native and foreign Jews—against all those who, from the Russians' viewpoint, are *goyim*.

It is generally thought that the Russians won the battle of Kulikovo, although only one out of every ten Russian soldiers was left alive, and although a few years later the Tatars again captured the chief Russian cities, including Moscow and its citadel, the Kremlin. From Kulikovo to World War II, military victories have cost the Russians so dearly in terms of human lives that they might as well be regarded as defeats. Russia's apocalyptic fear of China is due, *inter alia*, to the latter's great stock of cannon fodder: its population is now four times that of Russia, and by the year 2000 it will be five times as great. For

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

China, it is even easier than for Russia to sacrifice millions, and to regard as military victories what are actually defeats in terms of lives lost.

That fear is Russia's chief historical stimulus today. It dictates Russia's diplomatic behavior and military strategy, and is responsible for its return to Stalinism. Russia is preparing for war not only militarily but by means of ideological rearmament. Hence the hastened tempo of the ideological revolution, aimed at quickly preparing the nation for the impending war, since time is not on the side of the Russians. If World War III comes to pass, it will be due to the Russian fear of China.

What are the Russians hoping for? A war could destroy the empire, but it could also strengthen it. It could even become a new form of existence for the empire: a means of ideological re-animation and political rebirth.

The audience does not have long to wait. Its position, though, is not entirely safe: the stage is too close to it, and there is no proscenium. But to guess at the outcome of the conflict would be frivolous. It is saddening to think of those three hundred million remaining Chinese grabbing the baton to continue the human relay race: there is a kind of ethnic and cultural monotony in that.

Translated by Guy Daniels

We regret the death of

ALVIN W. GOULDNER

1920–1980

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marianne DeKoven

MRS. HEGEL-SHTEIN'S TEARS

In contemporary fiction, the impulse to recreate form is at loggerheads with the impulse to tell about everyday life. Grace Paley is a rare contemporary who feels both impulses, and in her work they cohere. It would be easy to read her stories without recognizing that they give two very different kinds of pleasure—the intellectual, aesthetic pleasure of inventive language and form, and the emotional, moral pleasure of deftly handled, poignant theme— without realizing that one was having the best of two historically sundered fictional modes.

Though Paley has published only two collections of stories, *The Little Disturbances of Man* and *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, she is nonetheless an important writer—important in the significance of the fictional possibilities she realizes rather than in the uniform merit of her published work. She is not always at her best. But when she is, Paley reconciles the demands of avant-garde or postmodern form for structural openness and the primacy of the surface with the seemingly incompatible demands of traditional realist material for orchestrated meaning and cathartic emotion.

"A Conversation With My Father," in *Enormous Changes*, makes of this seeming incompatibility an argument between father and daughter, from which emerges the statement, crucial to Paley's work, that traditional themes can no longer be treated *truthfully* by formally traditional fiction: formal inventiveness and structural open-endedness not only make fiction interesting, they make it "true-to-life." Paley's concern is not mimesis or verisimilitude, but rather the problem of creating a literary form which does not strike one as artificial; which is adequate to the complexity of what we know. Her narrator in "A Conversation With My Father" calls traditional plot "the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes away all hope. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life." Her father, arguing that plot is the truth of tragedy, wants her to write like Chekhov or Maupassant:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end." Paley's narrator-surrogate, arguing for open-ended hope and change, clearly bests her father in the conversation. But in the story, Paley gives him the last word: the setting is his hospital room, and he speaks from what we may assume is his deathbed. His lecture on writing is "last-minute advice," and the closing speech, from father's pain to daughter's guilt, is his: "'How long will it be?' he asked. 'Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?'"

The assertion of hope through change and open-endedness is therefore neither easy nor unambiguous. As the literary father sees, an inevitable component of optimistic belief in saving the situation through "enormous changes at the last minute" is evasion of genuine and unavoidable horror, the father's tragedy. As Faith herself says in "Living" (*Enormous Changes*), "You have to be cockeyed to love, and blind in order to look out the window at your own ice-cold street."

Paley herself, though endorsing in the structure of her fiction the narrator's point of view, is increasingly ambivalent about traditional storytelling. She discusses that ambivalence, which she divides in this story between the narrator and the father, in a "Symposium on Fiction" (reprinted in *Shenandoah* Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 3-31):

> When you talk about new forms or different forms, it seems to me this non-linearity has really run its course, played its game out. I understand it, it has been my way of working too. I haven't moved dead ahead except once in a while in that sense, and I wonder about our need for storytelling in its most simple linear sense of *what happened then, and then what happened, and what came next* . . . . People ought to live in mutual aid and concern, listening to one another's stories. That's what they ought to do. I'm not doing that, I'm very much a person in my time.

Though linear storytelling is attractive to Paley's moral-political sensibility, and she feels guilty that she doesn't write that way, the marrow of her fictions remains "enormous changes at the last minute." Her narrator in "A Conversation With My Father" claims that she does not hate plot "for literary reasons." But Paley's narrator is either misrepresenting or misunderstanding the "literary reasons" of Paley's fiction. Traditional plot does not necessarily preclude the possibility of hope; or, in cruder terms, the possibility of a happy ending. The narrator confuses the closure of traditional plot with the closure of despair, and once we acknowledge her mistake, we can go on to see her very "literary" reason for making it: it is the "enormous change" *as a phenomenon of literature* that is life-giving and hope-giving. In

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Life" (the conversation between father and daughter), the father in his hospital room not only propounds but represents the tragic vision: he is dying testimony to the inevitability of what the narrator, meaning hopelessness, calls plot. In "Literature" (the story-within-a-story the narrator invents about a redëemed junkie), the narrator insists not so much on a happy ending for her character but on sudden and total change interrupting what would be a tragic trajectory toward doom in the kind of traditional fiction her father wants her to write. Life, unlike the narrator, has no pity: it is about to deprive her of her beloved father. The locus of the "open destiny of life," where hope and "enormous changes at the last minute" are possible, is fiction itself.

Paley places the tragic material which interests and moves her within an antitragic structure of sudden, abrupt transformations, "enormous changes," but the tragic material is nonetheless left intact. There is none of the hollow laughter, the mocking, alienated distance from pathos that is characteristic of serious modern fiction. But transformation undercuts tragic inevitability—fictional structure becomes tragedy's antidote rather than either its vehicle or its negation—and, equally important, as we will see, transformation undercuts the sentimentality that so easily trivializes pathos.

The people Paley's narrator in "A Conversation With My Father" would accuse of having merely "literary reasons" for rejecting traditional plot might explain the "enormous change" as an interesting substitute for outworn, tedious literary convention (linear plots are stale and boring), infusing new life into fiction. But Paley's structures are more than that. They are rooted not only in an assertion of open-endedness and possibility, and in a nonlinear vision of life's events, but also, ultimately, in a profound commitment to freedom as a primary value (nonlinearity is not as alien to Paley's politics as it might appear). For many postmodernists, that freedom is problematic; tangled with fear of chaos on one hand and of authority on the other (see Tony Tanner's *City of Words*). But the freedom implied for Paley by "enormous changes," the freedom from inevitability or plot, is synonymous with hope; hence her larger assertion that open-endedness in fiction is the locus of "the open destiny of life," to which everyone is *"entitled"*—a strongly political statement. Paley's phrase "enormous changes at the last minute" is the speech of a hippy cabdriver-songwriter-motherlover who assures middle-aged Alexandra, childless, whom he fills with hope in the form of a baby, that his generation will save the world:

> The kids! The kids! Though terrible troubles hang over them, such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> as the absolute end of the known world quickly through detonation or slowly through the easygoing destruction of natural resources, they are still, even now, optimistic, humorous, and brave. In fact, they intend enormous changes at the last minute.

Tentatively and comically, Paley offers fiction's "enormous changes" as a warbling counternote to the tragic gong, even in twentieth century political life, that notoriously unredeemed domain.

The tragic subject matter of Paley's work reaches the reader emotionally as pathos, a tricky entity because it so easily becomes sentimental. However, pathos remains pathos in Paley's work: she jerks no tears but neither does she freeze them. Instead, she distracts the reader from pathos at dangerous moments, when sentimentality threatens, by calling attention to her wildly inventive, comic language and imagery. In those moments when her language takes on the burden of simultaneously communicating and distracting from pathos, Paley creates a unique and fascinating literary object.

In "Faith in the Afternoon" (*Enormous Changes*), Faith, recently abandoned by her husband, is visiting her parents in their old people's home, "The Children of Judea." Faith's mother belongs to the "Grandmothers' Wool Socks Association," governed by the formidable Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, who rolls noiselessly in and out of everyone's privacy "on oiled wheelchair wheels." Mrs. Hegel-Shtein is an ineluctable and pitiless purveyor of sad stories. She forces Faith's mother, who wants to spare her daughter more unhappiness, to discuss the tragic fates of various of Faith's childhood friends, beginning with Tess Slovinsky, whose first child was a "real monster," and:

> "[The second] was born full of allergies. It had rashes from orange juice. It choked from milk. Its eyes swoll up from going to the country. All right. Then her husband, Arnold Lever, a very pleasant boy, got a cancer. They chopped off a finger. It got worse. They chopped off a hand. It didn't help. Faithy, that was the end of a lovely boy. That's the letter I got this morning just before you came."
>
> Mrs. Darwin stopped. Then she looked up at Mrs. Hegel-Shtein and Faith. "He was an only son," she said. Mrs. Hegel-Shtein gasped. "You said an only son!"

Mrs. Hegel-Shtein is vulnerable to Arnold Lever's gruesome fate through her love of her own "only son," Archie. Faith's mother tells Arnold Lever's story from the great distance of the comic grotesque. He does not represent the kind of pathos Paley is interested in: his is sensational horror, not the unostentatious, commonplace pain of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

everyday life. Because she feels deeply Mrs. Hegel-Shtein's commonplace pain, Paley reaches a moment of potential sentimentality, her cue for magnificent writing: "On deep tracks, the tears rolled down her old cheeks. But she had smiled so peculiarly for seventy-seven years that they suddenly swerved wildly toward her ears and hung like glass from each lobe." The image of Mrs. Hegel-Shtein's tears swerving along deep tracks, formed by seventy-seven years of peculiar smiling, to hang from her ear lobes like crystals, is so striking that it appropriates most of our attention as we read, preventing us from noticing particularly the pathos which we nonetheless feel. The fate of Mrs. Hegel-Shtein's tears is exactly the fate of our own. They fall, but they are "wildly" diverted along literally comic tracks to become something other than tears, something not at all commonplace; in fact, something transcendent: they crystallize into literary epiphany.

Pathos is neither transformed nor displaced by language: it remains intact, registered at a more or less subliminal level. But it combines with the startling, comic-bizarre language and imagery to make a profound literary moment which we experience simultaneously as a unity beyond both pathos and language, and also as a concatenation of the two separate elements, each maintaining its integrity.

For Paley, "life" need not be rescued from sordid insignificance by "literature." She does not translate or transform one into the other, but rather allows them to coexist in her work, partly separate, partly clashing, partly fused. We do not look *through* her images to find the meanings behind them; instead, the arresting, startling language and imagery comprise one element of the fiction, the feelings and meanings they communicate another. We receive them with different kinds of attention:

> "I was popular in certain circles," says Aunt Rose. "I wasn't no thinner then, only more stationary in the flesh. In time to come, Lillie, don't be surprised—change is a fact of God. From this no one is excused. Only a person like your mama stands on one foot, she don't notice how big her behind is getting and sings in the canary's ear for thirty years. Who's listening?"

That opening establishes the story's central contrast between Aunt Rose's painful, unconventional, but authentic life and her sister's conventional but empty life. While we focus on the excessive, absurd comic image of the fat woman standing on one foot singing in a canary's ear, and on the inventive language, we absorb, almost subliminally, the essential geography of a conventional thematic terrain.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But just as often as they function separately in Paley's work, prose surface and story come together in the peculiar way of Mrs. Hegel-Shtein's tears, in those moments when language must suddenly distract the reader from pathos, misleading us about the primary emotion of the fictional material. Again, in the best of those moments, surface and feeling register on the one hand separately, as strangely irreconcilable, and on the other harmoniously, as an irreducible literary epiphany.

Paley's work is honeycombed with such moments:

> Eddie looked up and saw his father. Their eyes met and because of irrevocable pain, held. That was the moment (said Shmul, later on after that and other facts) that Eddie fell head-first into the black heart of a deep depression. This despair required all his personal attention for years.

> He had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber's snake, could work its way through the ear down the throat, halfway to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment.

> I own two small boys whose dependence on me takes up my lumpen time and my bourgeois feelings. . . . When I'm not furiously exhausted from my low-level job and that bedraggled soot-slimy house, I praise God for them. One Sunday morning, my neighbor, Mrs. Raftery, called the cops because it was 3 a.m. and I was vengefully singing a praising song.

> He took hold of me with his two arms as though in love and pressed his body hard against mine so that I could feel him for the last time and suffer my loss. Then he kissed me in a mean way to nearly split my lip. Then he winked and said, "That's all for now," and skipped off into the future, duffel bags full of rags.

> Air was filtering out of my two collapsing lungs. Water rose, bubbling to enter, and I would have died of instantaneous pneumonia—something I never have heard of—if my hand had not got hold of a glass ashtray and, entirely apart from my personal decision, flung it.

> After that, Alexandra hoped every day for her father's death, so that she could have a child without ruining his interesting life at the very end of it when ruin is absolutely retroactive.

At the heart of Paley's engagement with everyday life is her deep empathy with her characters. Even the deserters and betrayers she allows their "reasons," as she might say, and the rest she actively

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

likes—a stance even more unusual in serious postmodern fiction than her assertions of hope in the face of our despair. It is not surprising that this uncommon empathy, which is really the condition of adherence to subjects of everyday life, is the province of a woman. Empathy and compassion are legacies of sexism that women do well to assert as privileged values rather than reject as stigmata of oppression. Uncomfortable as it makes her to write in such a predominantly male tradition, as a woman in the avant-garde, Paley is in an especially propitious position to unite interesting forms with important themes. She uses innovative form much as she uses innovative activism, to make new the endlessly dreary and shameful moral-political world we inhabit.

"Mississippi Review is elegant, warm, thoughtful, has a weight to it and a simplicity— the magazine is being noticed as it ought to be."

—Joseph McElroy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FICTION

Italo Calvino

IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER

In a network of lines that enlace

The first sensation this book should convey is what I feel when I hear the telephone ring; I say "should" because I doubt that written words can give even a partial idea of it: it is not enough to declare that my reaction is one of refusal, of flight from this aggressive and threatening summons, as it is also a feeling of urgency, intolerability, coercion that impels me to obey the injunction of that sound, rushing to answer even with the certainty that nothing will come of it save suffering and discomfort. Nor do I believe that instead of an attempted description of this state of the spirit, a metaphor would serve better, for example the piercing sting of an arrow that penetrates a hip's naked flesh, but this is not because one cannot employ an imaginary sensation to portray a known sensation, for though these days nobody knows the feeling of being struck by an arrow, we all believe we can easily imagine it—the sense of being helpless, without protection in the presence of something that reaches us from alien and unknown spaces: and this also applies very well to the ring of the telephone—but rather because the arrow's peremptory inexorability, without modulations, excludes all the intentions, implications, hesitations possible in the voice of someone I do not see, though even before he says anything I can already predict if not what he will say at least what my reaction to what he is about to say will be. Ideally the book would begin by giving the sense of a space occupied by my presence,

---

These excerpts are from IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER by Italo Calvino, translated by William Weaver, to be published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers. Copyright © 1979 by Giulio Einaudi editore s.p.a., Torino, English translation copyright © 1981 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because all around me there are only inert objects, including the telephone, a space that apparently cannot contain anything but me, isolated in my interior time, and then there is the interruption of the continuity of time, the space is no longer what it was before because it is occupied by the ring, and my presence is no longer what it was before because it is conditioned by the will of this object that is calling. The book would have to begin by conveying all this not only immediately but as a diffusion through space and time of these rings that lacerate the continuity of space and time and will.

Perhaps the mistake lies in establishing that at the beginning I and a telephone are in a finite space such as my house would be, whereas what I must communicate is my situation with regard to numerous telephones that ring, telephones that perhaps are not calling me, have no relation to me, but the mere fact that I can be called to a telephone suffices to make it possible or at least conceivable that I may be called by all telephones. For example when the telephone rings in a house near mine, for a moment I wonder if it is ringing in my house, a suspicion that immediately proves unfounded but which still leaves a wake since it is possible that the call might really be for me and through a wrong number or crossed wires it has gone to my neighbor, and this is all the more possible since in that house there is nobody to answer and the telephone keeps ringing, and then in the irrational logic that ringing never fails to provoke in me, I think: perhaps it is indeed for me, perhaps my neighbor is at home but does not answer because he knows, perhaps also the person calling knows he is calling a wrong number but does so deliberately to keep me in this state, knowing I cannot answer but know that I should answer.

Or else the anxiety when I have just left the house and I hear a telephone ringing which could be in my house or in another apartment and I rush back, I arrive breathless having run up the stairs and the telephone falls silent and I will never know if the call was for me.

Or else also when I am out in the streets, and I hear telephones ring in strange houses; even when I am in strange cities, in cities where my presence is unknown to anyone, even then, hearing a ring, my first thought every time for a fraction of a second is that the telephone is calling me, and in the following fraction of a second there is the relief of knowing myself excluded for the moment from every call, unattainable, safe, but this relief also lasts a mere fraction of a second, because immediately afterwards I think that it is not only that strange telephone that is ringing; many kilometers away, hundreds, thousands of kilometers, there is also the telephone in my house, which certainly at that same moment is ringing repeatedly in the deserted rooms, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again I am torn between the necessity and the impossibility of answering.

Every morning before my classes begin I do an hour of jogging, that is I put on my Olympic sweatsuit and I go out to run because I feel the need to move, because the doctors have ordered it to combat the excess weight that oppresses me, and also to relieve my nerves a little. In this place during the day if you do not go to the campus, to the library, or to audit colleagues' courses, or to the University coffee shop, you do not know where to go; therefore the only thing is to start running this way or that on the hill, among the maples and the willows, as many students do and also many colleagues. We cross on the rustling paths of leaves and sometimes we say "Hi!" to each other. Sometimes nothing, because we have to save our breath. This too is an advantage running has over other sports: everybody is on his own and is not required to answer to the others.

The hill is entirely built up and as I run I pass two-storey wooden houses with yards, all different and all similar, and every so often I hear a telephone ring. This makes me nervous; instinctively I slow down; I prick up my ears to hear if somebody answers and I become impatient when the ringing continues. Continuing my run I pass another house in which a telephone is ringing, and I think: "There is a telephone chasing me, there is somebody looking up all the numbers on Chestnut Lane in the directory and he is calling one house after the other to see if he can overtake me."

Sometimes the houses are all silent and deserted, squirrels run up the tree trunks, magpies swoop down to peck at the feed set out for them in wooden bowls. Running, I feel a vague sensation of alarm, and even before I can pick up the sound with my ear, my mind records the possibility of the ring, almost summons it up, sucks it from its own absence, and at that moment from a house comes, first muffled then gradually more distinct, the trill of the bell, whose vibrations perhaps for some time had already been caught by an antenna inside me before my hearing perceived them, and there I go rushing in an absurd frenzy, I am the prisoner of a circle in whose center there is the telephone ringing inside that house, I run without moving away, I hover without shortening my stride.

"If nobody has answered by now it means nobody is home. . . . But why do they keep on calling then? What are they hoping? Does a deaf man perhaps live there, and do they hope that by insisting they will make themselves heard? Perhaps a paralytic lives there, and you have to allow a great deal of time so that he can crawl to the phone. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Perhaps a suicide lives there, and as long as you keep calling him some hope remains of preventing his extreme act. . . ." I think perhaps I should try to make myself useful, lend a hand, help the deaf man, the paralytic, the suicide. . . . And at the same time I think—in the absurd logic at work inside me—that in doing so I could make sure the call is not by chance for me. . . .

Still running I push open the gate, enter the yard, circle the house, explore the ground behind it, dash behind the garage, to the tool shed, the dog house. Everything seems deserted, empty. Through an open window in the rear a room can be seen, in disorder, the telephone on the table, continuing to ring. The shutter slams; the window-frame is caught in the tattered curtain.

I have circled the house three times; I continue to perform the movements of jogging, raising elbows and heels, breathing with the rhythm of my run so that it is clear my intrusion is not a thief's; if they caught me at this moment I would have a hard time explaining that I came in because I heard the telephone ring. A dog barks, not here, it is the dog of another house that cannot be seen; but for a moment in me the signal "barking dog" is stronger than the "ringing telephone" and this is enough to open a passage in the circle that was holding me prisoner there, now I resume running among the trees along the street, leaving behind me the increasingly muffled ringing.

I run until there are no more houses. In a field I stop to catch my breath. I do some kneebends, some pushups, I massage the muscles of my legs so they will not get cold. I look at the time. I am late, I must go back if I do not want to keep my students waiting. All I need is for the rumor to spread that I go running through the woods when I should be teaching. . . . I fling myself onto the return road, paying no attention to anything, I will not even recognize that house, I will pass it without noticing. For that matter the house is exactly like the others in every respect, and the only way it could stand out would be if the telphone were to ring again, which is impossible. . . .

The more I turn these thoughts over in my head, as I run downhill, the more I seem to hear that ring again, it grows more and more clear and distinct, there, I am again in sight of the house and the telephone is still ringing. I enter the garden, I go around behind the house, I run to the window. I have only to reach out to pick up the receiver. I say, breathless: "He's not here . . ." and from the receiver a voice, a bit vexed, but only a bit, because what is most striking about this voice is the coldness, the calm, says: "Now you listen to me. Marjorie is here, she'll be waking in a little while, but she's tied up and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can't get away. Write down this address carefully: 115 Hillside Drive. If you come to get her, okay; otherwise there's a can of kerosene in the basement and a charge of plastic attached to a timer. In half an hour this house will go up in flames. . . ."

"But I'm not—" I begin to answer.

They have already hung up.

Now what do I do? Of course I could call the police, the fire department, on this same telephone, but how can I explain, how can I justify the fact that I, in other words how can I who have nothing to do with it have anything to do with it? I start running again, I circle the house once more, then I resume my way.

I am sorry for this Marjorie, but if she has got herself into such a jam she must be mixed up in God knows what things, and if I step forward to save her nobody will believe that I do not know her, there would be a great scandal, I am a professor at another university invited here as visiting professor, the prestige of both universities would suffer. . . .

To be sure when a life is in the balance these considerations should take a back seat. . . . I slow down. I could enter any one of these houses, ask them if they will let me call the police, say first of all quite clearly that I do not know this Marjorie, I do not know any Marjorie. . . .

To tell the truth here at the University there is a student named Marjorie, Marjorie Stubbs: I noticed her immediately among the girls attending my classes. She is a girl who you might say appealed to me a lot, too bad that the time I invited her to my house to lend her some books an embarrassing situation may have been created. It was a mistake to invite her: those were my first days of teaching, here they did not yet know the sort I am, she could misunderstand my intentions, that misunderstanding took place, an unpleasant misunderstanding, certainly even now very hard to clarify because she has that ironic way of looking at me, and I am unable to address a word to her without stammering, the other girls also look at me with an ironic smile. . . .

Yes, I would not want this uneasiness now reawakened in me by the name Marjorie to prevent me from intervening to help another Marjorie whose life is in danger. . . . Unless it is the same Marjorie. . . . Unless that telephone call was aimed personally at me. . . . A very powerful band of gangsters is keeping an eye on me, they know that every morning I go jogging along that road, maybe they have a look-out on the hill with a telescope to follow my steps, when I approach that deserted house they call on the telephone, it is me they are calling, because they know the unfortunate impression I made on Marjorie that day at my house and they are blackmailing me. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Almost without realizing it, I find myself at the entrance to the campus, still running, in jogging garb and running shoes, I did not go by my house to change and pick up my books, now what do I do? I keep on running across the campus, I meet some girls drifting over the lawn in little groups, they are my students already on their way to my class, they look at me with that ironic smile I cannot bear.

Still making running movements, I stop Lorna Clifford and I ask her: "Is Stubbs here?"

The Clifford girl blinks. "Marjorie? She hasn't shown up for two days. . . . Why?"

I have already run off. I leave the campus. I take Grosvenor Avenue, then Cedar Street, then Maple Road. I am completely out of breath, I am running only because I cannot feel the ground beneath my feet, or my lungs in my chest. Here is Hillside Drive. Eleven, fifteen, twenty-seven, fifty-one; thank God the numbers go fast, skipping from one decade to the next. Here is 115. The door is open, I climb the stairs, I enter a room in semi-darkness. Tied on a sofa there is Marjorie, gagged. I release her. She vomits. She looks at me with contempt.

"You're a bastard," she says to me.

What story down there awaits its end?

Walking along the great Prospect of our city, I mentally erase the elements I have decided not to take into consideration. I pass a Ministry building, whose facade is laden with caryatids, columns, balustrades, plinths, brackets, metopes; and I feel the need to reduce it to a smooth vertical surface, a slab of opaque glass, a partition that defines space without imposing itself on one's sight. But even simplified like this, the building still oppresses me: I decide to do away with it completely; in its place a milky sky rises over the bare ground. Similarly I erase five more Ministries, three banks, and a couple of skyscraper-headquarters of big companies. The world is so complicated, tangled, and overloaded that to see into it with any clarity you must prune and prune.

In the bustle of the Prospect I keep meeting people the sight of whom, for various reasons, is unpleasant to me: my superiors, because they remind me of my inferior position; my inferiors, because I hate to feel possessed of an authority I consider petty, as petty as the envy, servility, and bitterness it inspires. I erase both categories, without any hesitation; out of the corner of my eye, I see them shrink and vanish in a faint wisp of fog.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In this operation I am careful to spare passersby, outsiders, strangers who have never bothered me; indeed, the faces of some of them, if I observe them objectively, seem worthy of sincere interest. But when a crowd of strangers is all that remains from the world surrounding me, I suddenly feel lonely and disoriented, so better to erase them as well, the whole lot, and forget it.

In a simplified world I have greater probabilities of meeting the few people I like to meet: Franziska, for example. Franziska is a friend, and when I run into her, I feel a great joy. We exchange witticisms, we laugh, we tell each other things, ordinary events, but perhaps ones we do not tell other people, and when we discuss them together, they prove interesting to both of us, and before saying goodbye, we both insist we must meet again as soon as possible. Then months pass, until we run into each other in the street, by chance: festive cries, laughter, promises to get together again soon, but neither of us ever does anything to bring about a meeting; perhaps because we know that it would no longer be the same thing. In a reduced and simplified world, now that the air has been cleared of all those pre-established situations which would make the fact of my seeing Franziska more often suggest a relationship between us somehow requiring definition, perhaps eventual marriage or, in any event, our being considered a couple, assuming a bond possibly extending to our respective families, to our forebears and descendants, to siblings and cousins, and a bond between the environment of our joint lives and our attachments in the sphere of incomes and possessions; now, having achieved the disappearance of these conditions which, all around us, silently, weighed on us and on our conversations, causing them never to last more than a few minutes, my meeting Franziska should be even more beautiful and enjoyable. So it is natural for me to try to create the circumstances most favorable to a crossing of our paths, such as the abolition of all young women wearing a pale fur like the one she wore last time, so that if I see her from a distance, I can be sure it is she, without any risk of misunderstandings or disappointments, and then the abolition of all young men who look as if they might be friends of Franziska and might conceivably be about to meet her, maybe intentionally, and delay her in pleasant conversation just when I should be the one to meet her, by chance.

I have gone into details of a personal nature, but this should not lead anyone to believe that my abolitions are inspired primarily by my own immediate, private interests; on the contrary, I try to act in the interest of the whole (and hence also my own, but indirectly). True, to begin somewhere, I made all the public buildings that occurred

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

within my range disappear, with their broad steps and columned entrances and their corridors and waiting rooms, and files and circulars and dossiers, but also with their division chiefs, their director-generals, their vice-inspectors, their acting heads, their permanent and temporary staff; but I did this because I believe their existence is damaging or superfluous to the harmony of the whole.

It is that time of day when droves of employees leave the overheated offices, button up their overcoats with their fake-fur collars, and pile into buses. I blink, and they have vanished: only some scattered passersby can be discerned, far off, in the deserted streets from which I have also scrupulously eliminated automobiles and trucks and buses. I like to see the surface of the street bare and smooth as a bowling alley.

Then I abolish barracks, guard-houses, police stations: all people in uniform vanish as if they had never existed. Perhaps I've let things get out of hand; I realize that firemen have suffered the same fate, and mail-carriers, municipal street-cleaners, and other categories which might deservedly have hoped for a different treatment; but what's done is done: no use splitting hairs. To avoid trouble, I quickly abolish fires, garbage, and also mail, which after all never brings anything but problems.

I check to make sure that hospitals, clinics, rest homes have not been left standing: to erase doctors, nurses, patients seems to me the only possible health. Then courts, with their complement of magistrates, lawyers, defendants and injured parties; prisons, with prisoners and guards inside. Then I erase the University with the entire faculty, the Academy of sciences, letters, and arts, the Museum, the Library, monuments and curators, theaters, movies, televisions, newspapers. If they think respect for culture is going to stop me, they're wrong.

Then come the economic structures, which for too long a time have continued to enforce their outrageous claim to decide our lives. What do they think they are? One by one, I dissolve all shops, beginning with the ones selling prime necessities and ending with those selling superfluities, luxuries: first I clear the display windows of goods, then I erase the counters, shelves, salesgirls, cashiers, floorwalkers. The crowd of customers is momentarily bewildered, hands extended into the void, as shopping carts evaporate; then the customers themselves are also swallowed up by the vacuum. From consumer I work back to producer: I abolish all industry, light and heavy, I wipe out raw materials and sources of energy. What about agriculture? Away with that, too! And to prevent anyone from saying I want to regress towards primitive societies, I also eliminate hunting and fishing.

Nature . . . Aha! Don't think I haven't caught on: this nature

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

business is another fine fraud: kill it! A layer of the earth's crust is all that has to remain, solid enough underfoot, and everywhere else, nothingness.

I continue my walk along the Prospect, which now cannot be distinguished from the endless plain, deserted and frozen. There are no more walls, as far as the eye can see, no mountains or hills; not a river or a lake or a sea: only a flat, gray expanse of ice, as compact as basalt. Renouncing things is less difficult than people believe: it's all in getting started. Once you've succeeded in dispensing with something you thought essential, you realize you can also do without something else, then without many other things. So here I am walking along this empty surface that is the world. There is a wind grazing the ground, dragging with flurries of fine snow the last residue of the vanished world: a bunch of ripe grapes which seems just picked from the vine, an infant's woolen bootee, a well-oiled hinge, a page that seems torn from a novel written in Spanish, with a woman's name: Amaranta. Was it a few seconds ago that everything ceased to exist, or many centuries? I've already lost any feeling of time.

There, at the end of that strip of nothing which I continue to call the Prospect I see a slender form advancing, in a pale fur jacket: it's Franziska! I recognize her stride in her high boots, and the way she keeps her arms hidden in her muff, and the long striped scarf flapping after her. The cold air and the cleared terrain guarantee good visibility, but I wave my arms in vain, trying to attract her attention: she can't recognize me, we're still too far apart. I advance, hastening my steps; at least I think I'm advancing, but I lack any reference points. Now, on the line between me and Franziska, some shadows can be discerned: they are men, men in overcoats and hats. They are waiting for me. Who can they be?

When I have come close enough, I recognize them: they're the men from Section D. How is it they've remained here? What are they doing? I thought I had abolished them too when I erased the personnel of all the offices. Why have they placed themselves between me and Franziska? "Now I'll erase them!" I decide, and concentrate. Nothing doing: they're still there between us.

"Well, here you are," they greet me. "Still one of us, are you? Good for you! You gave us a real hand, all right, and now everything is clean."

"What?" I exclaim. "Were you erasing as well?"

Now I can understand my sensation that, this time, I had ventured

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

farther than in my previous exercises of making the world around me disappear.

"But tell me something: weren't you the ones who were always talking of increment, of implementing, of expansion. . . ."

"Well? There's no contradiction. . . . Everything is contemplated in the logic of projections. . . . The line of development starts again from zero. . . . You had also realized that the situation had come to a dead end . . . was deteriorating. . . . The only thing was to help the process along. . . . Tendentially, something which might seem negative in the short run, in the long run can prove an incentive. . . ."

"But I didn't mean it the way you did. . . . I had something else in mind . . . I erase in a different way . . . " I protest, and I think: if they believe they can fit me into their plans, they're wrong!

I can't wait to go into reverse, to make the things of the world exist again, one by one or all together, to set their variegated and tangible substance, like a compact wall, against the men's plans of general vacancy. I close my eyes and reopen them, sure of finding myself on the Prospect again, teeming with traffic, the street lamps lighted at this hour, and the final edition of the papers in the kiosks. But instead: nothing. The void all around us is more and more void, Franziska's form on the horizon comes forward slowly, as if she had to climb the curve of the earth's globe. Are we the only survivors? With mounting terror I begin to realize the truth: the world which I believe erased by a decision of my mind that I could revoke at any moment is truly finished.

"You have to be realistic," the officials of Section D are saying. "Just take a look round. The whole universe is . . . let's say it's in a transitional phase. . . ." And they point to the sky, where the constellations have become unrecognizable, here clotted, there rarefied, the celestial map in upheaval, stars exploding one after the other, while more stars emit a final flicker and die. "The important thing is that now, when the new ones arrive, they must find Section D in perfect working order, its cadres complete, its functional structures in operation . . . "

"But who are the new ones? What do they do? What do they want?" I ask, and on the frozen surface that separates me from Franziska I see a fine crack, spreading like a mysterious trap.

"It's too early to say. For us to say it in our terms. At present we can't even see them. But we can be sure they're there, and for that matter, we had been informed, even before, that they were about to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arrive. . . . But we're here, too, and they can't help but know it, we who represent the only possible continuity with what there was before. . . . They need us. They have to turn to us, entrust to us the practical management of what remains. . . . The world will begin again the way we want it. . . ."

No, I think, the world that I would like to begin existing again around me and Franziska can't be yours; I would like to concentrate and think of a place, in every detail, a setting where I would like to be with Franziska at this moment, for example a café lined with mirrors, which reflect crystal chandeliers, and there is an orchestra playing waltzes and the strains of the violins flutter over the little marble tables and the steaming cups and the pastries with whipped cream. While outside, beyond the frosted windows, the world full of people and of things would make its presence felt: the presence of the world, friendly and hostile, things to rejoice in or to combat. . . . I think this with all my strength but by now I know my strength isn't enough to make it exist: nothingness is stronger and has occupied the whole earth.

"To work out a relationship with them won't be easy," the Section D men continue, "and we'll have to be on our toes, not make mistakes, not allow them to cut us out. We had you in mind, to win the new ones' confidence. You've proved your ability in the liquidation phase, and of all of us you're the least compromised with the old administration. You'll have to introduce yourself, explain what the Section is, how they can use it, for urgent, indispensable jobs . . . Well, you'll figure out the way to make things look best. . . ."

"I should be going then. I'll go look for them . . ." I hasten to say, because I realize that if I don't make my escape now, if I don't reach Franziska immediately and save her, in a minute it will be too late; the trap is about to be sprung. I run off before the Section D men can hold me, ask me questions, give me instructions. I advance over the frozen crust towards her. The world is reduced to a sheet of paper on which nothing can be written except abstract words, as if all concrete nouns were finished; if one could only succeed in writing the word "chair," then it would be possible to write also "spoon," "gravy," "stove," but the stylistic formula of the text prohibits it.

On the ground that separates me from Franziska I see some fissures open, some furrows, crevasses; at each moment one of my feet is about to be caught in a pitfall: these interstices widen, soon a chasm will yawn between me and Franziska, an abyss! I leap from one side to the other, and below I see no bottom, only nothingness which continues down to infinity; I run across pieces of world scattered in the void; the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

world is crumbling. . . . The men from Section D call me, they motion desperately for me to come back, not to risk going any farther. . . . Franziska! One more leap and I'll be with you!

She is here, she is opposite me, smiling, with that golden sparkle in her eyes, her small face a bit chapped from the cold. "Oh! It's really you! Every time I walk on the Prospect I run into you! Now don't tell me you spend all your days out strolling! Listen: I know a café here at the corner, all lined with mirrors, and there's an orchestra that plays waltzes. Will you invite me there?"

Review

Latin American Literature and Arts

Subscribe Now!

Individual Subscription $10.00 • Foreign $12.00
U.S. Institution $15.00 • Foreign Institution $20.00

Published three times a year. Back issues available.

NAME

ADDRESS

A publication of the Center for Inter-American Relations
680 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dennis Barone

AN INTERVIEW WITH GILBERT SORRENTINO

Gilbert Sorrentino was born in Brooklyn, attended Brooklyn College, was drafted into the United States Army, and then returned to Brooklyn College. He was Editor of *Neon* from 1956 to 1960 and he was Guest Editor of *Kulchur* #4. His first book, *The Darkness Surrounds Us*, was published in 1960 by Jonathan Williams. His other books include: *Black and White, Corrosive Sublimate, The Sky Changes, Steelwork, Splendide-Hotel, Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things, Flawless Play Restored: The Masque of Fungo, White Sail,* and *The Orangery*. Gilbert Sorrentino lives in Manhattan.

Dennis Barone: Let's start with Pound—it wasn't just money that he was talking about, but the city.

Gilbert Sorrentino: Right. It's the curious permutations that money forces art and the artist into. For instance, publishers are, by and large, no longer the friends of artists, but have quite clearly set themselves up as hostile to art—art is not salable. The very worst houses are those that pretend an interest in good letters. Pound was no economist, but he could see what was happening. If you live any length of time in this society as an artist you become absolutely intuitive about what's happening to you. You know exactly what your value is. Your value is nothing, zero. You might as well not be here. The longer you live as an artist, the poorer your value is, in economic terms. You cannot make something that society can sell, so down you go.

Barone: I got the sense that in the *Cantos* Pound thought that an artist should be kind of like William Morris. You know, not only should he paint and write poetry, but he should build furniture too.

Sorrentino: Artists must confront the fact that they live in this particular world. They should use the very materials of this terrifying world in order to make an art which replies to this world. You cannot make the world any better for yourself or for anyone else by harking back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to the time of the glorious primitive. You have to take what they give you and see if you can turn those materials into something valuable. It's a hard time to be an artist, the whole world is geared against it.

Barone: O.K. I notice in your reviews that you never tiptoe along the fence. That's good.

Sorrentino: I came to the conclusion long ago that it's better to make a fool of yourself than to waffle. If you think you know what you're talking about, but you're not quite sure, say it anyway. So what? You turn out five or ten years later to be a dope. On the other hand, it may turn out that you said something that a later reader will find valuable for further investigation.

Barone: Do you ever feel with your own writing that maybe you made a fool of yourself in that you assimilated—like learning from Robert Creeley—before you really understood it?

Sorrentino: Before I knew exactly what Creeley was up to I saw in him something useful? Well, there was something I wanted to do in my own work, and I didn't know how to do it. When I first read Creeley, I said that's the voice I understand. I began, then, to see in Creeley a way of entering. My work rather quickly branched off—split off—from Creeley's long ago. I have a lot of difficulty right now trying to follow Creeley. I don't really know what he's up to. But in his earlier work it seems to me that he had found a kind of absolute voice for that odd generation which is my own. One feels a terrific sense of fidelity to those writers, even though we've gone our separate ways. The sense of loyalty is there because we all seemed to be muddling through it at the same time. Creeley has an introduction to a book in which he says the "new" writer had a very hard time in the forties and fifties—really the understatement of the year. It was a ridiculous time to be a writer with different ideas.

Barone: A lot of times you've said that the fifties were very boring to you.

Sorrentino: Oh, they were desperate years, at least the early fifties. Creeley was then at Black Mountain, where there was an artistic community, but it was very different to live in New York, which was much more enslaved at that time by the literary establishment than it is now. There is no New York literary establishment now, none, that is, that is not totally corrupted and frivolous, but in the fifties there was quite literally no place to publish if you did not either know those people or write the way they thought you should write. As Creeley put it, these men, the arbiters of taste in the late forties and throughout the fifties, thought of literary form as something "extrin-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sic to the given instance." That's his phrase. Quite just and absolutely precise. If you wanted to write a novel you wrote a novel the way Norman Mailer wrote a novel or James Baldwin wrote a novel or James Jones wrote a novel. There was no other way of writing a novel. Kerouac said in the face of this, "Fuck you!" That's what his novels should have been subtitled: *The Dharma Bums, or Fuck You!* That was Kerouac, that was his beauty. A remarkably courageous man. He wrote a novel called *The Town and the City*. It's competently written, well plotted, the characters are, as they say, realized and developed, and so on. A very formal first novel which got excellent reviews. Kerouac could have parlayed that reception, as many young writers do, into a second novel just as dead, just as silly. Instead, he wrote *On the Road*, which took many years to be published. Who would publish such a thing? This wasn't a "novel." The editors didn't know what it was because they hadn't read anything like it in college. Editors know what the spirit of the age tells them. Editors are probably among the dullest of all human beings. Enormously incompetent.

Barone: How long did you work for Grove?

Sorrentino: Five years. Grove was, of course, not your run-of-the-mill publishing house. Economics was never taken into consideration while I was there. My one complaint about Grove is that it missed the opportunity it had in the mid-sixties to get all the new American writers under contract.

Barone: There are a lot of interviews where you run across Donald Allen's name.

Sorrentino: Don Allen was one of the original editors with Barney Rosset after he bought Grove, then became an editor of *Evergreen Review*, and then became a kind of roving editor for Grove. He's responsible for *The New American Poetry*. If you were not there at the time you cannot imagine what that book meant. It was a central event of the age. It was curiously fitting that it should be published in 1960, at the turn of the decade. Don very consciously titled the book: not *New American Poetry*, but *The New American Poetry*, which was intended as a slap in the face of the establishment. And it was, indeed.

Barone: Do you think that the poetry that was in *The New American Poetry* has or may become a new form of academicism?

Sorrentino: Well, I think some of it already has. There's no helping that. There are a lot of forms, if you want to use such a loose term, that were set down in *The New American Poetry* for investigation,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and they have become a kind of *lingua franca* for the next generation of poets. But one has to wait; you have to give a poet a lot of room. The sixties were a bad time for poets because of the war and the social turmoil. There was such a sense that poets had to address themselves to these terrible wrongs, which is always deadly, deadly for poetry. Poems simply do not end wars, the fact is.

Barone: What about the effect of World War II on the poets of the fifties?

Sorrentino: The sense of making the new poem would have occurred much earlier had there been no World War II. That grim academic poetry that flourished from the late thirties until 1945 would have died sooner. It still goes on, but it's dead. Who cares? I don't really care about Robert Lowell. *Lord Weary's Castle,* which I admire very much, is a remarkable book; but I don't care about anything else Lowell did after. It's official poetry. I think it is even worse than it used to be because it has taken on the sheen of the "new"—either in formal terms or in terms of "content."

Barone: What about the people from the *Kenyon Review,* like Allen Tate?

Sorrentino: They really should not have had the deadly influence they had. You can't denigrate their intelligence, it's just that their intelligence was put to the service of the wrong thing.

To me the classic example of the failure of American literary criticism centers on the fact that William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky worked in almost total obscurity throughout the thirties, the forties, and most of the fifties. Louis is still almost totally obscure. Williams is slowly beginning to emerge as a kind of freak. The "Peck's bad boy" of poetry: good ol' kindly Doc Williams and his harebrained ideas. What can one say about the intelligence of literary criticism when none of the literary critics of fame paid any attention to two of the great American poets of the modern age: Williams and Zukofsky? Where were they?

This happens with American literature all the time. Williams himself was aware that it was happening to all American writers who had begun to do something that was not the norm. Every American writer who has anything to say spends at least half of his creative life clearing the ground for himself, then he begins to speak. I leave out, of course, the endless waste of energy spent in trying to earn a living, trying to get published, and so on. Unless you want to be a full-time teacher, you are a member of the scuffle.

Look at Edward Dahlberg. He spent his whole life clearing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ground. I don't think Dahlberg ever said what he really wanted to say. He spent his whole life scolding you, which is ground clearing. Americans come very late, if at all. They're always writing against the grain. They have to battle everything, not only their own time, but their past as well. They have to battle against all that masquerades as fine writing. You battle all your life against the sensibility that presents Norman Mailer to you as an important figure.

If an American publisher knew beforehand that a book would sell a thousand copies, he wouldn't publish it. If a first novel in this country doesn't sell five thousand copies, it's a bust. The publisher will never take you on again. Dahlberg is the great case in point: every book he wrote was published by a different house. American writers have a terrible time. A man from the *Times Book Review* was telling me the other day that a writer who has a "track record"—abominable phrase—of writing good books that make no money has progressively greater difficulties in getting published despite the quality of his work—in fact, as his work gets better he has less and less chance of being published by a trade house.

Barone: How did Williams come to appear in *Neon*?

Sorrentino: While I was in the army from '51 to '53, I wrote a very impressionistic piece on a Mexican border town named Nuevo Laredo. When I got out of the army I began reading Williams seriously, for the first time, and I read his poem called "Desert Music," which is about a visit to a Mexican border town. I was struck by the fact that he had felt moved enough to write a poem about his visit and I sent him this short piece telling him that I had just read his "Desert Music." To my astonishment (later I realized I shouldn't have been astonished because Williams was like that with everybody; he was a completely available man), he wrote back. He liked the piece and he thought that although it was rough it showed talent and promise. We began to correspond and then he asked me out to his house for dinner. I went out and we became friends—"friends" in an odd sense: I was in my twenties and he was a man of almost seventy. He could have been my grandfather. I began this magazine in '56 and asked him if he had any work. He didn't give me anything for the first issue because he said it was not a good idea: you're just using me as a crutch for the issue, a name to put in the magazine so people will buy it.

Barone: Speaking of names, why did you pick *Neon*?

Sorrentino: Well, *Neon*! Because it was a magazine, you know, out of New York, neon lights being an emblem of New York, and also, as I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

recall, neon in Greek is the neuter form of *neos*, "new things."

Barone: Did you ever look upon yourself as a regional magazine?

Sorrentino: I suppose so, but of course a lot of other people came into it. When it first came out, I don't know what I thought of it. We were hopeful, you know, hopeful and naive as to what the magazine could do or who would come into it. Then I was immediately astonished because as that first little fifteen-page issue came out it was obvious that there were dozens of writers who had no place to go. I thought that I had no place to go, but that other writers were there somehow. There were few magazines then, unlike now. The little magazines that existed were mostly rotten; the literary equivalent of a candle in a wine bottle.

Barone: What do you think was the matter with the regular magazines? Why were they so unwilling to open up?

Sorrentino: Because, I think, they didn't see the need for literature to freshen itself. I mean, the last word had been said by Eliot and Frost and Lowell, etc. That's where they wanted to stay. They thought of literature as something that had been formalized. It was already dead, and you couldn't do anything new. Whatever you had to say, there was this "form" that already existed, into which you put "it." If you made your own form for what you had to say, they didn't recognize it as being literature. That's why if you read the short stories and the sections from novels that appeared in those magazines, quarterlies, in the forties and fifties, they're all alike. They were as predictable as the stories that appear in *The New Yorker.* The quarterlies had the same kind of story, plus that terrifying criticism. My God, the technique of anything was never discussed. How a guy did it was never talked about. It was, "what does he mean by so-and-so?" and then *they* would tell you.

Barone: Where was *Neon* selling and who published it?

Sorrentino: It was sold in the Eighth Street. It was sold in the Gotham. I'm sure they still have copies in the cellar. It was just "us" who published the magazine, students at Brooklyn College. Most of us were veterans. We all wanted to write and all had begun to write and had no place to publish. We felt extremely rebellious against the entire literary establishment and bored to death by college. It was very odd coming back to college after having been in the army, because you felt like an old man. I had married and had a child. When I went back to college, there I was, in classes with people who quite literally had nothing to do with my life. They were talking about dances and fraternities. I had begun to write and then met men

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who were also writing. We were all unbearably broke. If six of us together had fifty cents we were lucky. I recall splitting an egg salad sandwich four ways in the cafeteria.

Barone: How did you get the money to print *Neon*?

Sorrentino: The first issue was paid for by a guy named Fred Siegel.

Barone: He did the Pound translations?

Sorrentino: Right, he was a Pound devotee. The second issue was paid for by Cubby Selby—Hubert Selby. He was the only one of us working then. The rest were unemployed or were students on the G.I. Bill. That's the issue I got Williams into because he liked the first issue. Paul Goodman also contributed to the second issue.

Barone: How did Goodman get into it?

Sorrentino: Cubby met him at a party and told him about the magazine and Paul said he'd like to contribute. It's hard to realize that at that time, 1956, Paul Goodman had an audience of maybe a hundred people. Most of his books were privately printed and distributed. Paul became known through his writings on education and sociological change, you know, *Growing Up Absurd*. To this day I think very few people read his fiction and his fiction is remarkable. You can tell a Paul Goodman story by one paragraph—it's unique; nobody writes like that. So, he contributed to that issue and we just went on from there.

Cubby was in that issue too. His first published story, "Home for Christmas." I read it over a couple of weeks ago for the first time in I suppose twenty years. It has all the earmarks of his later work. I've often told people the logical next step, post-Hemingway, is Selby's prose.

Barone: It was Cubby who took you to the Cedar and introduced you to all those people?

Sorrentino: No, I had heard of it through a painter friend of mine. In the mid-fifties the Cedar was strictly a painters' club. It was originally a Chinese restaurant, I believe. Then it became a bar. Two guys took it over, Sam and John, who still own it. At that time many of the abstract painters in New York lived on 10th Street, near Third Avenue. In those days you could get a loft for fifteen dollars a month, a cold water loft. It was possible to live cheaply in New York, which is why abstract painting was born in New York. Not only was it possible to live here cheaply, but, as many painters have told me, there's a quality of light in New York which you don't get in other cities. The light in New York is very hard. I reread *The Aspern Papers* a few weeks ago and James mentions the quality of American

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

light as being very hard and brittle, a bad painter's light—for that kind of painter, yes; but for an abstract painter it was an excellent light, a dry light. In any event, they all started to hang around the Cedar when it became a bar, because it was nearby. They dropped in at four or five o'clock in the afternoon in their painters' clothes to have a couple of beers. I got to know the Cedar, and soon after that it came to be a bar for artists of all stripes.

In those early days, painters and writers didn't have much to say to each other. Slowly it changed. A writer of "the new persuasion," if you will, had much more rapport with an abstract painter than he had with a writer of a 1940 sensibility. It was all very exciting; everything was happening at once. Right in the middle of it, Black Mountain closed. All those people who were at Black Mountain had to go somewhere. Most of them came to New York. Those who didn't went to San Francisco, so you had these two "colonies."

The Cedar was a remarkable place and became a famous bar; the more famous it became, the more impossible. It finally became a place where the wealthy came on Friday and Saturday to see the beasts, the animals in their lair. John and Sam, though, were unimpressed. John was a dear friend of Pollock, Kline, Guston, and De Kooning. He took longer to warm up to the writers. John used to be a window washer before he took over the Cedar. A story goes that he took painting lessons secretly: he didn't want anyone to know because his personality was that of a tough truck driver. Sam had been a butcher, born and raised in Greenwich Village on Bleeker Street. Sam was more of a businessman.

That was when almost everybody was broke. And the painting community was a much smaller one at the time. Somebody has made the point that one of the reasons why the first generation abstract expressionist painters were unspoiled was because their fame and wealth came to them too late to really matter. These were men in their mid-forties. They had all been broke for years. Suddenly, they had one-man shows and were instantly world celebrities. It was amusing. They had stood at the bar all their lives with three dollars in their pockets. Now they were standing at the same bar with five hundred dollars in their pockets. The same men, the same beer. Nothing really changed them much.

Barone: What was the price of a beer in those days?

Sorrentino: It was a dime. Ten cents a beer at the Cedar and every fourth round on the house. There used to be an "artist's special," not so-called, but that's what it was. The Cedar made marvelous soup, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

really rich, thick soup—a vegetable soup, a Yankee bean soup, a marvelous clam chowder. They would give you a huge bowl of soup plus all the bread and butter you wanted. That was twenty-five cents, I think. Their blue plate specials—meat, a vegetable, a starch, and a salad—started at maybe ninety-five cents and went up to maybe two dollars. That was quite a meal. Spend a buck and a half, with a beer or two, and you could have an enormous meal. If you had another buck, you could spend the rest of the night at the bar. That's why everybody was there. Where else would you go?

Money was hard to come by. But prices were also low. As late as 1963 I lived in a four room apartment on St. Mark's Place and Avenue A on the top floor of a tenement which overlooked Tompkins Square Park; an absolutely beautiful view. I had five, six windows facing east and two windows that faced south. It was fifty dollars a month and I debated whether I should take it or not because it seemed so expensive. At that time on the Lower East Side you could get apartments beginning at twenty-five dollars a month. That is certainly why so many people were there: an artist could actually live in New York. The Lower East Side was heaven.

Jazz musicians, postbe-bop musicians, they all lived in New York and played in lofts. You could always hustle the rent; that was the marvel of it. If the end of the month was coming and you were absolutely broke, you could always borrow twenty dollars. It wasn't like looking around to borrow four hundred dollars.

Barone: How about interaction among the artists?

Sorrentino: Oh, it was complete. You knew everybody. That's how it was. You'd walk down the street and bump into somebody you knew. When LeRoi Jones had his loft on 14th Street, he gave huge parties. Just about every writer, painter, musician, sculptor in New York passed through LeRoi's house. He would have music for dancing or for listening. The musicians? Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Don Cherry. They'd all come and play for nothing, they were guests at the party. They'd just bring their horns. The Cedar, and Dylan's, another bar where everybody used to hang out if the Cedar was jammed, those two places and LeRoi's were the focal points in New York for artists to gather. It was quite remarkable.

It all ended in 1967 with the "summer of love." The hippies arrived in New York with their flowers and their drugs and they destroyed it. The reason it was possible for an artist to live on the Lower East Side was because there was a tenuous balance, a delicate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ecology worked out in terms of the composition of the neighborhood. The Puerto Ricans and the blacks were living in a careful relationship with the old Ukrainians, Italians, Poles, Russians, and Jews. The artists came, but they came slowly and they were serious and they were as broke as everyone else. They became a new part of the community and were not resented, they were able to live there. When the summer of love came in 1967, it was a disaster. All these kids came with their flowers and their bells and their drums and their feathers and their funny clothes and their drugs and their money—their goddamned money. It was unheard of. Here were people who had lived their lives in poverty, who were used to being poor, but they didn't live degraded lives. Delicately, delicately, they made an arrangement with life. Here came these kids who dressed as if they were bums: no shoes, no socks, pants with big holes in them, their hair uncombed, their faces dirty, and yet they all had fifty, sixty dollars in their pockets. So it seemed to the old natives. They could buy anything they wanted and they lived this way? Great resentment began to build against the artist because so many of these kids came there with "artistic" ideas and clad in what the old-timers considered artistic clothes—a hippie and a poet: they both had beards and couldn't speak Russian or Italian or Spanish, so they were the same thing; so the feeling went. Confusion. It got bad for artists there. The rents became insane. The real-estate guys started to see these kids come in and if they asked them for seventy-five dollars the kids would say, "Sure." The kids were dummies. They thought seventy-five dollars was what you were supposed to pay on the Lower East Side. Artists fled. Between 1967 and 1970 the Lower East Side changed from a poor but very, very good neighborhood to a true jungle, shattered in terms of morale and economy.

Barone: How much of it all—the artistic community, the "new" writers—was chance?

Sorrentino: Like any "movement" it was essentially accidental—people of the same age, with the same ideas, in the same place; it all came together at the same time, within two or three years. It was one of those curious things that just occur. Why were the painters living on Tenth Street? Why, just two blocks away, did a Chinese restaurant turn into a bar hospitable to painters? Why, at that time, did the beats decide to travel from San Francisco back to New York: Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso? Why did Black Mountain close? My generation, when the war ended, was anywhere between sixteen and twenty years old, so in the mid-fifties we were all between twenty-six and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thirty, a time at which you've decided what you really want to do. Everybody was at that age at which you've committed yourself. It was a time when young men would not be accepted in *The Hudson Review*. Men of my age had only each other and we started our own magazines out of desperation. There was no place to publish so you published yourself. It was as simple as that. Kindred spirits met by accident and published together by design.

Barone: The work of these writers included some fine translations, didn't it? I think particularly of Paul Blackburn's Provençal poems.

Sorrentino: Yes, magnificent. The University of California recently brought out his anthology of troubador poems. It grieves me that Paul is not here to see the book finally come out, twenty years or more of labor, and remarkable translations. Paul once told me that the reason he started all this was because Pound told him he should start it, do it all.

Barone: Pound seems to have started everything.

Sorrentino: Pound. There is no way to gauge his importance. He is by far the most important literary figure of the twentieth century. His energy, his dedication, his brilliance, his critical faculties, his ability to find things out, to locate things, to attack what was rotten and to plug what was good. His casual remarks in letters and his short essays are, by themselves, enough to make most critics seem fatuous. Edmund Wilson is a kind of Tom Swift of letters compared to Pound. Just his services on behalf of Joyce are enough to make him great, and there's his own work. I don't think it's a mistake that Hugh Kenner called his book *The Pound Era*, which shocked a lot of people. They thought he should have called it *The Joyce Era* or *The Eliot Era*, but it's not. He's right, it's Pound.

We regret the death of

LARRY NEAL

1937–1981

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

POEMS

Marea Gordett

WHEN I WAS YOUNG

I always loved the word, foothills.
A little shape of nothing stands in the hills
pygmying out its life. On the other
hand, I hate the words: pretty, cuneiform, and hog.
Today, driving to the pretty foot-
hills, a cuneiform hog dashed across the sky.
This is to say, the fog
of confusion crossed my mind.
And confusion, what do we know of its lives?
In the deadnight, in the scorch of moon
it rises on its spy legs,
howling a jinx.
That's what you hear when you think:
wind.
And the wind, will it admit this?
It crawls it crawls
on the brown foothills,
mistralling a song.
Yesterday I heard the song twisting
the white birch and understood the sweet
cold lies, a child believing
everything she hears.

When I was young I thought a human
being was a legume
grown in the idea of birth.
I thought tarantula was the name
of death, living in the fruit of foreign countries,
I thought if you sat on the foothills
eating a banana
you could hear the dead walking on the other world.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brad Leithauser

ADDITIONAL BATS

Nightfall loosens them from the rocks
And trees to which like mushrooms
They fasten. Against the clearing's still-
lavender sky, dissolving in

And out of one's sight as fish will
Under the glinting and smoky
Lid of a stream, the bats
Pull to their swarm additional bats.

Theirs seems a gimpy flight, crude
Aerial gallop, yet they live
By hunting on the wing—swoop to strain
The chill night air for food.

Patrolling cries, a vision surer
Than sight, sound the treetops
At clearing's edge, the outcrops
Of stone, the ferns, the dense, standing

Water in the overhung ditch,
And return as rumpled echoes to
Ears that map the field according to
Its shifting, imperfect pitch.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

W.S. Di Piero

UNTITLED

I watch the argument of an afternoon
in the way light pauses on the tips
of grass, skips at the open eye of my door
and glazes this bowl of cold milk. Inside
the busy letters of a book
the argument goes on in the caged
clarity of *o*'s and *a*'s, the outreaching
solitude of *h*'s, *b*'s, *d*'s, prairie spaces
where meanings of the world melt away
into primitive gouges, loops, and slithers.
To read in the scrawl of the gone present
the brute longevities of past.

My moment in the afternoon is a poor home
for plenty. Most of all it houses
the noontide demon of hours licking
oblivion, slurping muddy water, to remit
the tedium of staring too long at oneself.
I watch my hand asleep in the highnoon light;
the moment its apartness takes shape
it suddenly becomes new to me, a song I've never
really sung. The light that argues it back to me
clamors into every object. Why do I care
if waxy repetition is the bottom of all speech?
Who spills real boring light into real words?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ann Lauterbach

SECOND DESCENT: 1980

Wooden crate pulled deftly apart;
thin paper set loose.
This while the tome is balanced
between your wife and not your wife, while
the requiem doles out illusions of return.
Sanctus. Curious. Delirium. Double stars
in the far pink sky; star, star, star.
"I haven't yearned since April."

Surcease, purview. Nothing so for miles
and now night. Lost sight of
noon's hollow girth, clam shells fitted,
all on the edge. Days when light
is hooped, a low band
on which some of us stand ready and waiting
to slip past the look just before the end.
"Only for a certain amount of time are we wanted."

Then, well then
we have it in mind to climb something steep
and to wear a hat. We have it in mind
to cross paths with those no longer recognized:
distant cousin, daughter of a long dead friend.
She writes impressions of bird songs for single cello.
All is forgotten. "After the war, we . . ."
All is forgotten. Ash end, unaware of deliverance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Colette Inez

UNTITLED

In the Process of Interpreting
Experience I See

a skating rink of light,
Ann Southern,
her snowy legs
sidestepping love's
soft focus glow
in a glaze of bulbs.

What's her plight?
The plot drawls on.
Cesar Romero at dawn
or Ricardo Montalban?

She gets
a Brazilian Millionaire
and has her love gold-lined
with Carmen Miranda
for dance and song.
Shboom Mama.

Moral: Ann Southerns don't marry poor Brazilians
don't marry poor Brazilians
poor Brazilians

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Richard Thomas

PILLOW CARDS

Get in with us and look us over, once.
Searching exquisite surfaces and promising some loss,
it would be nice to be guided patiently
keeping night's cover. On the white wall,
painted blue with wishes, we wait to find out
where to be to begin. We comb hair, adjust ourselves,
breathing and listening and wearing old perfume
to help remember how we are so we will know it if
you come again.

It used to be a sort of
invitation—a hollow
thudding, waiting,
a turning over against the pillow.
Times have changed its name to
some other, a simple quality
of need or seeming to.
Lost among the frequency of stars,
it is now indistinguishable from the night,
coming in her colors.
Clouds pass. Clouds pass. We sleep
spoon-fashion in the mouth of the wolf,
lucky to have our share.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When weather comes, it beats us conscious
and we separate, to the window, to the edge.
When we find each other after, that softness
lies between, calling attention to itself as if recurring in a dream.
So we run ourselves along it, discovering its lengths and depths,
returning to its need for calmness and exhaustion,
coloring it in the very dark with kisses.
It is in the quality of being blind to it that we come upon it,
not remembering the afternoon and its crammed vases,
when the figure reclining in relief seemed very like you,
or someone like you. We chose instead the morning,
sitting in the sunlight of a breakfast accounting,
hardly appearing to remember at all—as in the lobbies
of so many watering places. You were there.

In the arts of the orient there can be
a graciousness in the presence of what is not seen.
We are aware of something under the cloth,
seeing only the sharing of tea and the poling of boats.
At times we do not see the fisherman,
becoming lost in the arrangement of blossoms
in the house opposite, as he is lost in his boat
beneath his sail.
Though there are things to be explained in having seen:
Such as why the scent of hair and weave of silk,
or tone of voice and choice of words
upon your setting of the table,
allusions to the fragrance of a certain dish,
and why we couldn't just begin, and how we will.
And when. And if. And on and on until we sleep.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Armand Schwerner

PANTOUM, WITH SOME MATERIAL FROM GEORGE OPPEN AND ROBERT DUNCAN

over what has the air frozen?
let me give you an illusion of grieving
with the usual considerations
thick with succession of civilizations.

let me give you an illusion of grieving
'love one another or die'
thick with succession of civilizations
vein upon vein of stoned rhetors will never

love one another *or* die
do you pine for the compressed fatalities of black holes?
vein upon vein of stoned rhetors will never
explain to our hearts that we *are* the earth, but why

do you pine for the compressed fatalities of black holes
whose dense substance signals End to our energies?
explain to our hearts that we *are* the earth? but why?
the light of body-mind solidifies within the frozen air

whose dense substance signals End to our energies
midnights you snack on fantasies
the light of body-mind solidifies within the frozen air
how will you change your life?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

midnights you snack on fantasies:
the endless terrain between molecules . . .
how will you change your life
my love, scullion of Space and the black hole's fool?

the endless terrain between molecules
heartens you
my love, scullion of Space and the black hole's fool
your traffic in sentiments

heartens you:
your own stone chain reaction
your traffic in sentiments
your hominid *vanitas*

your own stone chain reaction
tailors you to invent
your hominid *vanitas*.
have done.

tailors. you. to invent
over what? *has* the air frozen?
have done
with the usual considerations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Florence Rubenfeld

THE BRIDEGROOM'S AT THE CENTER

The spindly man at the far left is the father of the bride.
He is paying for the picture.
At his side is a heftier woman, my mother.
The man's my father. I'm nowhere in the picture.
The center couple is the new bride and groom.
He's in the process of becoming my brother-in-law.
The corners of his thin mouth turn up in anticipation.
My sister has removed the veil from her eyes.
She cups her hand on the young man's forearm.
The veil's too large to be hidden in that small hollow.

At the right side (their left) is just one person.
She is a middle-aged woman holding a bouquet.
I remember being introduced to her—Sophie.
She is my naissant brother-in-law's mother.
If she weren't holding the bouquet it wouldn't be in the picture;
No one else would be there to hold it.
The others' hands are occupied in couples,
Nor would a vase be introduced.
Such a scene could be no place for still life—
"Fledglings, flowers and ferns."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We were told not to mention the asymmetry.
It would remind the half-orphan and his widowed mother
Of less happy times. Poor Abe.
I'm reminded that Cain in Hebrew means "yes"
But that could not have caused the missing man's death.

The reason I am not in the picture
Is that I'm introducing the photographer
To Minor White's zone system of photography.
Anyway I suspect I was holding the veil
Like a net for catching rice in.
I've put it in the place of the little dark curtain,
The type photographers enter to take old-fashioned 4×5 pictures.
Already my sister, the bride-in-the-making,
Has seen me catch her future brother-in-law,
the photographer, in my translucent net.
Nobody is smiling but the photographer and the cheese.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

C. Bursk

GOOD AS NEW

The doctors have been instructed to be as professional
as light—
to look at my body with light's curiosity.
How odd we seem to all that doesn't love us,
how easily light performs on us.
Hands are laid on me. Next.
Next.—light
understands this language.

I am already muttering
as if each word were too heavy.
I open my mouth
and it is full of smoke.
Before they have even warmed their hands,
crowded around me like a small fire
I am ashes
they are stoking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hold your penis,
the young man shouts and I feel the razor
slide across the black hairs,
my proud hairs.
Part of me is gaudy,
unruly, obvious. I try to keep the rest
proper as a stick of wood.
ingratiating to the hand and easily governed.

There are three of us outside short procedure.
Nothing much is to happen.
My body feels like leaves,
I have fallen from many places,
have been raked here.
I look for a doctor
as if I were turning to the light.
The hall is cold and unforgiving.

I am a stick. Use me.
Build this day's blaze out of me.
Lying in the crib
I wait for the flames.
I'll smuggle it into all that cleanliness.
Fire doesn't mind begging for attention.
It will be seen to,
soothed like an old pet going from room to room crying.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is nothing of me but this sleepy thought
of all I might make flare
but can't.
Is this all a stick knows?
to be a little consenting heat in a man's gloved hands,
a little slipperiness
for light to glance?
These two hours of mine are someone else's.

To be taken and broken,
to be agreeable
and naked as a stick.
Today I learn what a stick
feels. Nothing.
Nothing but
consent.

Rae Armantrout

PENDING

point of *entry.*

(Prestige surrounding 'entry'
bullies passers-by

as melody line
obscures dry fields. *Discrete*
bushes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two Poems by Milo De Angelis

Translated by Lawrence Venuti

THE CENTRAL IDEA

came to mind (but just by chance, because of the smell
of alcohol and the bandages)
this thoughtful busying of oneself
notwithstanding.
And still, in front of everybody, one chose
between the actions and their meaning.
But by chance.
Despotic beings gave away the center
carelessly, with an X-ray,
and in a dream threatening bosses
were whispering:
"if we take from you what isn't yours,
nothing will be left."

BECOMING

Another action, in the vineyard, gathering
this dusty, sweet muscatel
among the ants
that run across the sweat
on one's back, hurrying
beneath a sun that dries up everything
while the plain broadens, and something
that was enormous disappears
slips from the terror to the discomfort
of becoming unimportant, to the last
tremor, nothing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Charles Berezin

POETRY AND POLITICS IN EZRA POUND

Ezra Pound's anti-Semitism poses a problem that literary critics, by and large, have not handled with distinction. Such concerns are considered un-literary and beyond the immediate scope of the text. Sometimes a critic will include in his account of Pound a minute description of Major Douglas's economics, but only to demonstrate how Pound made use of that theory in *The Cantos*. But having seen that use, what then should the reader make of it? Until literary critics are willing to face anti-Semitism, Social Credit, and fascism as issues, as problems of the literary texts that make use of them, we shall be unable to come to a realistic appraisal of the work of Ezra Pound or of modernism as a cultural phenomenon.

Most critics, when confronted by Pound's anti-Semitism attempt to sweep it under the nearest apology, leaving conspicuous bulges in their arguments. Christine Brooke-Rose, in a remark characteristic of one type of apology, asserts: "His anti-Semitism is (or was) nasty, an aberration, even if in intention focused on the financial question." Calling his anti-Semitism an "aberration" is a disservice to Pound. Brooke-Rose counsels readers not to take him seriously. As Hyam Maccoby recently pointed out: "Pound himself would not have wanted to be judged as a moral incompetent who happened to have a knack for poetry." If we learn nothing else from Pound we learn that ideas do not exist in a historical vacuum. Denying this truth is perhaps the greatest harm Pound's "friends" can do when they treat his anti-Semitism as though the Holocaust never happened.

Another method of apology focuses on Pound's big-Jew-little-Jew distinction. In Canto LII, Pound says: ". . . sin drawing vengeance, poor yitts paying for . . . paying for a few big jew's vendetta on goyim." Some feel that in statements such as this Pound absolves the "poor yitts" from responsibility in the "big jew's" crimes. But this argument falls down if we consider that the only difference between the two is the "poor yitts'" lack of power. In *Guide to Kulchur* Pound remarked: "Meyer Anselm had, let us say, a purpose, a race (his own race) to 'avenge.'" Here, the "big jew's vendetta" is carried on in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interests of the "poor yitts." The "vendetta" becomes a racial characteristic. Meyer Anselm takes on the "vendetta" because of his "bigness," not as the result of a moral choice.

Some critics, notably Hugh Kenner and Clark Emery, feel that Pound absolved himself from the charge of anti-Semitism by making distinctions between "big jews" and "poor yitts" or by making statements like: "Usurers have no race. How long the whole Jewish people is to be sacrificial goat for the usurer, I know not." Hugh Kenner, in *The Pound Era*, remarked: "It is a pity Pound's distinction between the financiers and the rest of Jewry was not allowed to be emphasized while he was still in the habit of making it. Correctly or not, it attempted a diagnosis, and one tending rather to decrease than to encourage anti-Semitism." It is hard to say whether Kenner's statement is more remarkable for its paranoia or its naiveté. Who, we might ask, prevented the distinction from being emphasized? If the distinction was merely a habit that Pound fell into and out of, how important could it have been in the first place? And since when is a diagnostician not responsible for his incorrect diagnosis? And, lastly, how does Pound's distinction discourage anti-Semitism since it merely excuses the poor Jews from the usurious tendencies of the Jews as a whole?

But one need not condemn "the whole Jewish people" to qualify as an anti-Semite. The literature of anti-Semitism is filled with just such distinctions as Pound makes. It is useful in this context to compare Pound's statements with those of his contemporaries. Pound was hardly unique during the period between the world wars in featuring anti-Semitism in an analysis of social and economic ills. Understanding anti-Semitism as a cultural phenomenon rather than as isolated incidents of prejudice will help provide a context for Pound's work and thought.

Another American anti-Semite to whom Pound bore a more than superficial resemblance was Henry Ford. Pound always spoke of Ford with praise, and in Canto LXXIV, a copy of Ford's autobiography appears on the bookshelf of the virtuous mayor of Wörgl along with Dante and Heine. Between 1920 and 1922, Henry Ford's weekly magazine, *The Dearborn Independent*, published a series of anti-Semitic articles. Ford's biographers characterized this series, saying: "Its general thesis was that the international Jew, a secret leadership of the race, was bent on disrupting all Gentile life by war, revolt, and disorder, and thus finally gaining world control of politics, commerce, and finance." The "secret leadership of the race" resembles Pound's feelings about "big jews" and Meyer Anselm. Like Pound, the editors

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of *The Dearborn Independent* claim not to be against the Jewish people:

> The Jewish Question is not in the number of Jews who here reside, not in the American's jealousy of the Jew's success, certainly not in any objection to the Jew's entirely unobjectionable Mosaic religion; it is in something else, and that something else is the fact of Jewish influence on the life of the country where Jews dwell. . . . It is not the Jewish people, but *the Jewish idea*, and the people only as vehicles of the idea, that is the point at issue.

Critics who would defend Pound against the charge of anti-Semitism by pointing out Pound's distinction between "big jews" and "poor yitts" make an error when they consider anti-Semitism as merely a prejudice. Someone who is prejudiced against black people may assume that all black people are alike, but it rarely occurs to the bigoted imagination that all blacks are secretly conspiring together against whites—as the anti-Semite assumes that Jews are secretly conspiring against Gentiles. This added intensity enters anti-Semitism because it is a rationalized doctrine that defends a set of interests, rather than simply irrational feelings. Henry Ford identifies these interests for us: "The Jewish philosophy of money is not to 'make money' but to 'get money.' The distinction between these two is fundamental. That explains Jews being 'financiers' instead of 'captains of industry.'" Pound also makes a fundamental distinction between financiers and industrialists and pits them against one another. He assigns virtue to the "producers" and evil to the Jewish position, the usurious financiers:

> But the monopolies, the sanctions, the restrictions imposed by the guilds were, at least, monopolies of *producers*. The various monopolies which culminate in the monopoly of money itself, key to all other monopolies, were, and are monopolies of *exploiters*.
>
> The situation is complicated when the same man has his hand in both the production and the finance. Henry Ford found himself forced into this situation in order to defend himself against Wall Street.

Pound's conception of artists as "producers" may have contributed to his acceptance of the doctrine of anti-Semitism as a defense of "producers," but there can be no doubt that he accepted the doctrine whole and propounded it whole. Nevins and Hill, Ford's biographers, defend Ford from the charge of malicious intent by pointing out his naiveté and ignorance. But no one has claimed that his words were any the less harmful for that. Clark Emery, however, makes exactly this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

claim for Pound when he says that in the following quotation from one of Pound's radio broadcasts for Mussolini, "Pound had at least dissociated himself from Dachau and Buchenwald, the gas-chambers and the cattle-trains":

> Don't start a pogrom. That is, not an old style killing of small jews. That system is no good, whatever. Of course, if some man had a stroke of genius, and could start a pogrom at the top . . . there might be something to say for it. But on the whole, legal measures are preferable. The 60 Kikes who started this war might be sent to St. Helena, as a measure of world-prophylaxis, and some hyper-Kikes or non-Jewish Kikes along with them.

Pound has hardly dissociated himself from the gas-chambers. The pogrom is "no good, whatever" not because it is immoral, but because it is ineffective. Pound feels that eliminating only the "big jews" would be sufficient. But he is still advocating a "system" of *judenrein*, i.e., a system for ridding the world of Jewish influences. Pound's phrase "world-prophylaxis" is a distinct echo of the offensive German term. Neither does Pound specifically abjure murder. He merely says "legal measures are preferable." Emery wishes to dissociate Pound's words from the acts of the Holocaust. But the Holocaust was a feature of the doctrine that Pound accepted and propounded. The *judenrein* concept lies very much behind Pound's words.

There is another danger in this dissociation type of apology. Emery ends his discussion of Pound's anti-Semitism, saying:

> I have made somewhat more of this matter and of Pound's Fascist sympathies than I should have liked to do. It may be argued that, seen in their proper perspective and in strict terms of literary criticism, they are of minor importance. The critical evaluation of the *Faerie Queen* or of *Paradise Lost* does not hinge upon the anti-Catholicism or anti-monarchism of their authors.

Emery's "terms of literary criticism" are perhaps too strict if they do not admit ideology to be an important component of Pound's work (or of Spenser's or Milton's, for that matter), and his perspective is hardly proper if it allows him to think that the vulgarity of Pound's remarks is an unimportant feature. But Emery's statement manifests an even grosser historical blindness than considering anti-Semitism and fascism unimportant. Anti-Catholicism and anti-monarchism, as well as their respective opponents, were the representative ideologies of coherent sets of interests, backed by governmental structures and military power. Emery implies that Judaism is just such a coherent set of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interests. He cannot make this argument without adopting an attitude very much like the one he wants to excuse.

A third type of apology accepts the meanness of Pound's sentiments, but tries to diminish their importance by attributing them to a loss of control. William Chace adopts this method in *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot*:

> At times it seems merely that Pound is enraged at a certain general mode of thought and behavior but must, in accordance with his habitual procedures, give it a special designation—here "Hebrew." It is as if Pound, suddenly realizing that he, adamant against abstractions, was using abstractions, decided to obscure that fact by a sudden infusion of intemperance.

Here, anti-Semitism does not indicate a central flaw in Pound's argument so much as that argument erupting into intemperance. Chace's position differs from the "aberration" type of apology in that Chace feels that Pound's anti-Semitism "may be evaluated most productively as an altogether logical corollary to his philosophic and aesthetic principles, not as an inexplicable divergence from them." But Chace steps into a contradiction when he says of Pound's April 30, 1942 broadcast ("Don't start a pogrom," etc.): "There is perhaps only a clinical explanation for such utterances. They issue from an anger gone far beyond reason, from a desperation grown extreme." Chace makes a dangerous equation between reason and moderation. If Pound's anti-Semitism is truly "an altogether logical corollary to his philosophical and aesthetic principles," would those principles have been more reasonable if Pound's statement of them were more moderate? Would the doctrines with which Pound suffuses his poetry have been less pernicious if Pound's vitriolic anti-Semitism had not surfaced? If we take Pound's anti-Semitism seriously we must understand it as indicating a central flaw in his theoretical framework which takes its toll on almost every aspect of his work.

The point of confluence of anti-Semitism, fascism and Social Credit, occupies the center of Pound's thought. Although they sometimes occur simultaneously, these three concepts are not superficially connected. While anti-Semitism is a component of many fascist movements, Mussolini himself was not overtly anti-Semitic. There was no official Jewish persecution in Italy until 1938 when the first anti-Semitic laws were passed. Even then, the laws were resented by many Italian fascists as a symbol of Mussolini's domination by Hitler. Douglas consistently claimed to champion democracy and to be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unimpressed by either fascism or communism, although he was given to occasional Jew-baiting.

Pound's anti-Semitism bears the outline of much of the anti-Semitic propaganda that preceded World War II. In *The Cantos* and throughout his prose works we find the familiar anti-Semite's picture of the Jew as unproductive, parasitic and conspiratorial. In Canto XXXV we find:

> this is Mitteleuropa
> and Tsievitz
> has explained to me the warmth of affections,
> the intramural, the almost intravaginal warmth of
> hebrew affections, in the family, and nearly everything else. . . .
> pointing out that Mr. Lewinesholme has suffered by deprivation
> of same and exposure to American snobbery . . . "I am a product,"
> said the young lady, "of Mitteleuropa,"
> but she seemed to have been able to mobilize
> and the fine thing was that the family did not
> wire about papa's death for fear of disturbing the concert
> which might seem to contradict the general indefinite wobble.
> It must be rather like some internal organ,
> some communal life of the pancreas. . . . sensitivity
> without direction . . . this is . . . (35/172-3)

For Pound, creativity was masculine, phallic and individualistic. He depicts the Jews as feminine and communal. Pound considered a "direction of the will" to be an important component of culture. The Jews' "sensitivity without direction" suggests that they are incapable of producing or sustaining a culture. Because "sensitivity" seems to emanate from "some internal organ," the Jews do not have to strive for it. This passive receptivity is the opposite of the will. The flabby, indecisive language with which Pound describes the Jews, such phrases as: "it must be rather like some internal organ," can also be taken as an indication of Pound's feelings that the Jews were incapable of the kind of precision and hardness necessary to be artistic, productive people.

Pound's type of the productive man was Sigismundo Malatesta who asserted his will against all the obstacles Renaissance Italy could put before him and built the Tempio. Pound said of his Malatesta Cantos: "No one has claimed that the Malatesta cantos are obscure. They are openly volitionist, establishing, I think clearly, the effect of the factive personality, Sigismundo, an entire man." Lacking Sigismundo's type of individual will, a Jew could not have a "factive" personality, could not be a creative, "entire man."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pound undercuts the importance of individual exceptions to this rule by referring to that possibility with a double subjunctive. Such an exception "*might seem* to contradict the general indefinite wobble." The "wobble" remains "general," characteristic of the Jews as a whole despite individual exceptions. The exception that Pound shows us in Canto XXXV is ironic. Pound felt that emotion was essential to producing good art. He said in a letter to Iris Barry: "Also one must have emotion or one's cadence and rhythms will be vapid and without interest." Pound does not accuse the Jews of being unemotional. The drift of the passage from Canto XXXV is to accuse them of sentimentality. But by not wiring "about papa's death for fear of disturbing the concert," the Jews are keeping the emotion "in the family," exactly in accordance with Pound's complaints about them.

Creativity and masculinity were closely associated in Pound's mind. In a postscript to his translation of Remy de Gourmont's *Physique de l'Amour,* he claims:

> The brain itself, is, in origin and development only a sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense or reserve. . . . This hypothesis would perhaps explain a certain number of as yet uncorrelated phenomena both psychological and physiological. It would explain the enormous content of the brain as a maker or presenter of images.

As a "maker . . . of images," the artist would seem to be in close contact with the origin of his brain as semen. The feminine Jew, whose affections are "intravaginal" and whose religion forbids the making of images of the godhead, would seem to be excluded from artistic creativity in Pound's view. In the letter to Iris Barry cited earlier, Pound compares writing poetry to the working of a sculptor: "It is as simple as the sculptor's direction: 'Take a chisel and cut away all the stone you don't want.'" Here again is the artist as the *phallic,* aggressive male. The state of mind in which one must "cut away" is the opposite of the Jews' feminine "warmth" and "sensitivity."

Sentimentality, the opposite of the sculptor's ruthlessness, is characteristic of the Jewish artist:

> The tale of the perfect schnorrer: a peautiful chewish poy
> wit a vo-ice dot woult
> meldt dh heart offa schtone
> and wit a likeing for to make arht-voiks
> and ven dh oldt lady wasn't dhere any more
> and dey didn't know why, tdhere ee woss in the
> oldt antique schop and nobodty knew how he got dhere. (35/174)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Jewish approach to stone is to melt it, to destroy its essential nature, while the sculptor wants to realize the essential nature of the stone by chipping away at it. This view of sentimentality resembles Pound's complaint against usury, that it destroys the essential nature of money by creating money that does not represent work. Usury violates the nature of money as a "certificate of work done within a system."

Pound delineates the conspiratorial aspects of the Jews in Canto XXII:

> And we went down to the synagogue,
> All full of silver lamps
> And the top gallery stacked with old benches;
> And in came the levite and six little choir kids
> And began yowling the ritual
> As if it was crammed full of jokes,
> And they went through a whole book of it;
> And in came the elders and the scribes
> About five or six and the rabbi
> And he sat down, and grinned, and pulled out his snuff box,
> And sniffed up a thumb-full, and grinned,
> And called over a kid from the choir, and whispered,
> And nodded toward one old buffer,
> And the kid took him the snuff-box and he grinned,
> And bowed his head, and sniffed up a thumb-full,
> And the kid took the box back to the rabbi,
> And he grinned, e faceva bisbiglio,
> And the kid toted off the box to another bunch of old whiskers,
> And he sniffed up his thumb-full
> And so on till they'd each had his sniff
> And then the rabbi looked at the stranger, and they
> All grinned half a yard wider, and the rabbi
> Whispered for about two minutes longer,
> And the kid brought the box over to me,
> And I grinned and sniffed up my thumb-full.
> And then they got out the scrolls of the law
> And had their little procession
> And kissed the ends of the markers. (22/104-5)

The constant repetition of "And" at the beginnings of lines, although one of Pound's standard devices, is meant here to resemble the intoning of a liturgy. But the activity that the observer reports as ritualistic consists of grinning, whispering and taking snuff. He says of the actual ritual that the Jews treated it "as if it was crammed full of jokes." It seems to the observer that the Jews in this passage do not take seriously the content of their texts. What they do take seriously is some kind of secret that gives rise to all the whispering and grinning. The snuff-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

taking is the ritualistic confirmation of this mysterious compact. The outsider can take snuff and grin, but that does not make him privy to the Jews' secret because the ritual is only incidental to that secret as the Jewish Law is only incidental to the real content of Judaism.

The notion that the Jews do not take seriously the moral content of their texts, that there is a disparity between the Jewish Law and the propensities of the Jewish people, appears elsewhere in Pound's writings. In his pamphlet "What is Money For?" he states:

> At this point, and to prevent the dragging of red herrings, I wish to distinguish between prejudice against the Jew as such and the suggestion that the Jew should face his own problem.
>
> DOES he in his individual case wish to observe the law of Moses?
>
> Does he propose to continue to rob other men by usury mechanism while wishing to be considered a 'neighbor?'

Pound refers to the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures expressly forbid usury. But an ominous note creeps in when Pound suggests that usury is the Jew's "own problem." The Jews seem to be afflicted with an inability to follow their own law as a racial characteristic. This "problem" becomes more serious in Canto XXII where not taking the Scriptures seriously has become incorporated into the practice of Judaism.

We should note, however, that Clark Emery felt the description of the Jews in Canto XXII to be favorable: "In Canto XXII Pound describes the Jews in the synagogue and finds them to be characterized by two of his favorite virtues, *hilaritas* and *humanitas*." But to look upon this passage as a quaint description of Jewish mirth and good fellowship is to ignore, somewhat, its context. Immediately preceding the description of the synagogue Pound gives us a bleak little confrontation between fools and knaves played by tourists and guides respectively. Yusuf, the Jew, is the principal knave:

> And Yusuf said: Woat, he iss all thru Eetaly
> An' ee is nevair been stuck, ee iss a liar.
> W'en I goa to some forain's country
> I am stuck.
> W'en yeou goa to some forain's country
> You moss be stuck; W'en they come 'ere I steek thaim. (22/104)

The description of the synagogue continues in this vein as the naive tourist-observer is taken in by a quaint scene filled with ominous, ironic undertones.

We stated earlier that anti-Semitism is a rationalized doctrine and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not merely a prejudice held by irrational individuals. To see how anti-Semitism interconnects with other portions of Pound's thought, specifically with fascism and Social Credit, we need to understand how that argument works and to examine its components. Yet if we string together all of Pound's anti-Semitic statements we still have only a description of the Jew and not a discursive argument as to why he believed the Jews to have certain characteristics. As Pound himself stated in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini,* albeit in relation to another topic: "I am not putting in all the steps of my argument but that don't mean to say they aren't there." We can fill in the steps of Pound's anti-Semitic argument, show the framework he was working out of, if we again compare his statements with those of his contemporaries.

While European anti-Semitism has a long history, its emergence into nineteenth and twentieth century race theory marks the beginning of a special chapter. At this point, anti-Semitism evolves from a prejudice or philosophical vantage point, however degraded, into a doctrine that pretends to explain movements of world history and to be full of import for the present moment. One of the founders of this type of anti-Semitism was the British Germanophile, Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Chamberlain published his theories in a two-volume work, entitled *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century,* which was first published in 1899 and had gone through twenty-eight editions by 1942.

One need not demonstrate direct lines of influence between Pound and a seminal twentieth century anti-Semite like Chamberlain to point out that Pound appropriated many of the forms that Chamberlain pioneered. Compare, for example, Pound's comment on Meyer Anselm: "Meyer Anselm had, let us say a purpose, a race (his race) to 'avenge'. He used the ONLY weapons available for a tiny minority for a lone hand against organized goy power, pomp, militarism, rhetoric, buncombe," to Chamberlain's comment on what he termed "the forgeries of Ezra and the great synagogue":

> The many millions who were massacred by or for Christianity, as well as the many Jews who died for their faith, are all victims of the forgeries of Ezra and the great synagogue. But we cannot suspect the motives of these men. They acted in the greatest despair; they wished to accomplish the impossible—to save their nation from downfall. Certainly a noble goal! They could conquer only by employment of the most extreme means. It was a delusive but not an ignoble aim, for above all they wished to serve their God.

Both statements picture Jewish leaders overcoming tremendous odds and using desperate means to preserve the Jewish people. Also, both

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pound and Chamberlain begrudge admiration for Meyer Anselm and Ezra respectively for their tenacity and willingness to use desperate means.

For Chamberlain, the interests of the Jewish people as a whole were institutionalized in the "nomocracy," the rule of law, which "unites the Jews, no matter how scattered they may be over all the lands of the world, into a firm, uniform and absolutely political organism. . . . This national idea culminates in the unshakeable confidence in the universal empire of the Jews which Jehovah promised." Chamberlain makes no distinctions among the Jewish people, their supposed political organization, the "nomocracy," and the goal of that political organization, the Kingdom of God on Earth. But the Kingdom of God on Earth becomes distorted in Chamberlain's view into the "universal empire of the Jews." That the Kingdom of God on Earth meant that the Jews would possess material things follows from Chamberlain's notion that the Jews accept only material proofs of the existence of God. He claimed that the Jewish conception of God "is always . . . a question of outward experience, not of inner; the conceptions are always thoroughly concrete, material." The characterization of the Kingdom of God on Earth as a conquered "empire" follows from Chamberlain's inability to distinguish between rule-governed and rule-constituted behavior.

An example of rule-constituted behavior would be the game of chess which is nothing if not its rules. If one moved a bishop in a straight line instead of a diagonal, one simply would not be playing chess. Driving a car, for instance, is a different matter. If one chose to drive through red lights and stop at green ones, no one could say that this type of behavior was not driving a car. In rule-governed behavior, the rules are arbitrary. They are not intrinsic to the activity they govern. In rule-constituted behavior, the rules are the activity.

Chamberlain believed the Jewish Covenant to be rule-governed behavior:

> Pure materialism is the bargain which Jacob enters into with Jehovah (Genesis xxviii, 20–22), in which he makes five conditions, or, as the jurist would say, stipulations, and then concludes: as thou doest this so thou shalt be my God.

He believed that the activity the Jews were engaged in was the acquisition of the Kingdom of God on Earth. The Jewish Law is the means by which they acquire that Kingdom. To consider the keeping of that Law to be a type of rule-governed behavior instead of rule-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

constituted behavior is to deny moral content to that Law, a complaint similar to the one Pound made in Canto XXII. The Kingdom of God is a reward for keeping the rules, not the result of any activity involved in carrying them out. Chamberlain paraphrases Ezekiel, saying: "No, Israel is not in the world, to toil and wage war like other peoples, to work and to think, but to be the sanctuary of Jehovah; let it observe Jehovah's law, and all will be given to it."

The crucial point here is that the end point of the Jew's desires is not entailed in the means he uses to acquire it. The Kingdom of God on Earth becomes a conquered empire in Chamberlain's view because the Jews are not capable of working directly for anything; they can only take a kingdom, they cannot build one of their own. On the one hand, this conception has given rise to the picture of the Jews as an unproductive, parasitic people:

> If the Israelites had destroyed the old settled inhabitants, they would have made a desert of the land and robbed themselves of the prize of victory. By sparing them and, as it were, grafting themselves upon them, they grew into their culture. They made themselves at home in houses which they had not built, in fields and gardens which they had not laid out and cultivated.

And on the other hand, Chamberlain's view gives rise to the ubiquitous notion among anti-Semites of the Jewish plot:

> In humility he shall bow before God, but not in that inner humility of which Christ speaks—he bows his head before Jehovah because of the promise that by the fulfillment of this condition he will put his foot on the neck of all the nations of the world and be Lord and possessor of the whole earth. This one basis of Jewish religion includes, therefore, a direct criminal attempt upon all the peoples of the earth, and the crime cannot be disavowed because hitherto the power has been lacking to carry it out; for it is the hope itself which is criminal and poisons the heart of the Jew.

Conspiracy and lack of productivity coincide in Pound's chief complaint against the Jews: usury.

While this analysis might be difficult to reproduce in Pound's own words, it is not less central to Pound's thought because he was less specific than Chamberlain about the source of his anti-Semitic sentiments. Pound believed that an antiproductive principle was at work in history. The Jews, who do not work for their reward, became, in his mind, the chief purveyors of that principle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If we understand fascism to be the political movement of the petite bourgeoisie organized in its own defense, we shall see how anti-Semitism fits into the fascist conception of the world. The petite bourgeoisie exists as a special prerogative of the bourgeoisie. During times of economic expansion, the petit bourgeois artisan or small producer can become capitalized to the extent that he actually joins the ranks of the bourgeoisie. And during times of economic contraction he can be squeezed out of existence entirely and be forced into the ranks of the working class, i.e., be forced to work for wages. But the petite bourgeoisie has a much more concerted enemy than the seeming arbitrariness of economic cycles: the need at all times for the capitalist to expand or die. This need expresses itself as the tendency of capital towards concentration: more and more property in the hands of fewer and fewer capitalists. The concentration of capital produces a like concentration in the working class, whose interests as a class become more coherent vis-à-vis the increasing coherence of capital and provide more of a focal point for organization. But it is not until the organized working class is powerful enough to wrest some of its demands from the bourgeoisie, which the petite bourgeoisie sees as an attack upon its special prerogatives, that the fascist attacks. Wherever fascism came to power, it rode the crest of the white terror that followed the Russian Revolution and the many smaller and less successful proletarian revolutions that took place in Europe after World War I.

The fascist attack is two-pronged. It comes primarily as an attack upon working class organizations such as trade unions and socialist political parties, but it also includes an attack upon capital. The petite bourgeoisie cannot attack the bourgeoisie as a whole because it derives its special significance from the bourgeoisie. So, the fascist attacks that segment of capital which seems to him to provide the impetus for concentration, finance capital. The equation of Moscow and Wall Street in much of fascist propaganda reflects the fascist's quandary, as does Pound's unabated fury at banks and financiers throughout his whole life.

The Jews enter this configuration at various levels. At a simple level, Jews tend to be prominent in both financial and revolutionary circles. At a deeper level, we again find the concept in both sides of the fascist attack that the Jew's reward is not entailed in the Jew's activity. Pound makes the fascist's distinction between industrialist and financier:

> The terms 'labour', 'work', throughout this discussion apply to the man with the shovel, the clèrk, the transporter, the *entrepreneur*, etc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Everyone who acts in the transportation of the article from mother earth to the eater (eye of beholder, hand of user).

The "*entrepreneur*" or industrialist is a productive person, not so the financier:

> A certain part of the credit slips received by the *entrepreneurs* was wormed down a sort of tube. . . . And nothing was done against this amount of credit taken in from the public and hidden. It flowed continually down into the ground, down into somebody's pocket. . . . Manifestly we have seen companies building new plants out of 'profits'. Manifestly we have seen crises.

Here, financiers, the ones who "take in credit from the public," are pictured as hatching dark and mysterious plots to "worm" money away from the virtuous "*entrepreneurs.*" Bankers and financiers create money from "paper paradoxes" that do not represent anything actually made. When Pound blames the trickery and plot-hatching of financiers for "companies building new plants out of 'profits,'" instead of circulating those profits, he blames finance for capital's need to expand. Similarly, he blames finance for economic crises. Although Pound pointed out in many cases that not all those responsible for financial trickery are Jews, the anti-Semitic style predominates as those non-Jews become "non-Jewish Kikes."

Pound's analysis is close in style to that of the *Dearborn Independent.* The following is that journal's analysis of how the Jews have affected the other flank of the fascist's enemies, the working class:

> Now, previous to the advent of Jewish socialistic and subversive ideas, the predominant thought in the labor world was to "make" things and thus "make" money. There was a pride among mechanics. Men who made things were a sturdy, honest race because they dealt with ideas of skill and quality, and their very characters were formed by the satisfaction of having performed useful functions in society. . . . The only way to break down this strong safeguard of society—a laboring class of sturdy character—was to sow other ideas among it and the most dangerous of all the ideas sown was that which substituted "get" for "make." With the required manipulation of the money and food markets, enough pressure could be brought to bear on the ultimate consumers to give point to the idea of "get," and it was not long before the internal relations of American business were totally upset, with Jews at the head of the banking system, and Jews at the head of both the conservative and radical elements of the Labor Movement, AND, most potent of all, the Jewish Idea sowed through the minds of workingmen. What Idea? The old idea of "get" instead of "make."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What we have been calling lack of entailment, the *Dearborn Independent* calls "'get' instead of 'make.'" In this remarkable bit of analysis, the "Jewish Idea" of *get* becomes a mysterious tactic that the Jews use to insinuate themselves into positions of prominence. Notice again that the areas that the editors of the *Dearborn Independent* think the Jews are most interested in are the banking system and the labor movement. Like Pound's financiers, the Jews are pictured as hatching insidious plots and using financial trickery as one of their principal weapons. The manipulation of credit is an essential ingredient in Ford's conception of the Jewish plot. It is the mechanism that forces the idea of *get* on the working class.

It is a supreme irony that Henry Ford, as one of the pioneers of mass production which contributes to the alienation of the worker from his product, should blame the Jews for that alienation. The erroneous notion that the Jewish Law has no moral content is a purposeful if not a conscious misunderstanding. It enables the Jew to become a convenient screen upon which the fascist can project his bad dreams. Ezra Pound is no exception to this phenomenon.

Major Douglas, Pound's mentor in economics, also indulges in explanations of social and economic woes as the result of the plot-hatching of "the hidden hands of finance." Douglas's statements on credit and finance are more moderate than Pound's, but that is the only difference. Douglas provided the analysis for Pound's more hysterical pronouncements. Although Douglas claims to be a democrat, like the fascist he identifies his enemies as the banks and the unions, finance capital and the organized working class:

> With the Trust and Joint-Stock Banking System came agreements restricting price-competition, and with that came the apotheosis of Trade Unionism, forced to meet the situation by methods identical in principal, leading in both cases direct to sabotage.

Pound's economic theory hinges on a distinction between capital and property: "My bust by Gaudier is my property. Nobody is expected to do anything about it. My bond of the X and Y railroad is capital. Somebody is supposed to earn at least 60 dollars a year and pay it to me because I own such a bond." To Pound, property means control over things and capital means control over men. In *Anti-Dühring,* Engels predicted that such a distinction would lead to saying: "the capitalist mode of production is quite good and can remain, but the capitalist mode of distribution is no good and must be abolished." Pound accommodates Engels exactly when he says:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> But in 1918 we knew in London that the problem of production was solved, and that the next job was to solve distribution and that this meant a new administration of credit. I don't think there was any ambiguity about that. . . . The question being how and who was to break down the ring of craft, of fraud, and of iron.

Engels points out that control over men results from a previous control over things. Pound's false distinction between production and distribution, which was also held by Dühring, underlies the following false analysis:

> But what is it that makes Herr Dühring concoct this false definition of wealth, and why has he to sever the real relationship which has existed in all former class societies? In order to drag wealth from the domain of economics over into that of morals. Domination over things is quite all right, but the domination over men is an evil thing; and as Herr Dühring has precluded himself from explaining the domination over men by the domination over things, he can once again do an audacious trick and in a trice explain domination over men by his beloved force.

Engels offers an explanation for why economic problems appear to Pound as moral problems. Pound's question, "how and who was to break down the ring of craft, of fraud, and of iron," is phrased entirely in moral terms. "Solving distribution" means overcoming the evil designs of evil men. There is no essential flaw in the economics of the situation that overcoming evil cannot cure. Pound's and Dühring's positions are similar because they both lacked the perception that control over things precedes and enables control over men.

Major Douglas claims that a factory, as a distributor of financial values, makes two kinds of payments: "Group A—All payments made to individuals (wages, salaries, and dividends). Group B—All payments made to other organizations (raw materials, bank charges, and other external costs)." Douglas points out that the price of a commodity is determined by A+B, and since A will not purchase A+B, society will never have enough money to purchase its entire output. Douglas blames the banks:

> B is the financial representation of the lever of capital, and is constantly increasing in comparison with A. So that, in order to keep A and the goods purchased with A at a constant value, A+B must expand with every improvement of process, while at the same time this increased production must, in the nature of things, be of such a nature as will enable it to be paid for under group B. It must not, therefore, be an ultimate product—something that human beings, as such, require for their personal use—but must take the form of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> factory buildings, machinery, etc., for the production of which bank drafts can be obtained, or else be production for export.

For Douglas, the impetus for capital improvement comes from the banks. By causing a need for capitalists to expand, they are exploiting their favorable position "in the nature of things."

When Douglas says "in order to keep A and the goods purchased with A at a constant value, A+B must expand with every improvement of process," he merely reports backwards. A+B does not expand when productivity is increased, rather, A diminishes with respect to B; labor costs represent less of the full value of the commodity. Because Douglas reports backwards, he is mystified as to the source of the downward pressure on the value of labor power. He assumes that because banks make money from loans for "improvement of process," banks must be the culprits.

But why do Pound and Douglas consistently blame finance for the problems created by capitalism as a whole? How did they arrive at a picture of financiers and industrialists constantly at each others' throats? To further his argument, Douglas quotes a colleague saying:

> In highly developed countries such as ours practically all purchasing power commences life as credit created by the banks. These credits are created at the instance of manufacturers and dealers; are distributed by them in the shape of wages, salaries, and profits, and spent.

This statement is simply false. No financier will remain solvent very long who makes loans to industrialists who do not already own some means of production and at least potentially have a labor force at their disposal. Once again we are back to Engels's point that those who do not see the connection between production and distribution do not understand that men dominate other men through the things they control. "Purchasing power" does not commence "life as credit created by the banks," it commences as ownership of the means of production. Pound and Douglas did not follow the source of their problem back to production because they did not want to see ownership, the condition which precedes and enables exploitation, as an evil.

The inability of Pound and Douglas to see the chronology of the exploitative relationship is really a general blindness to chronology, which reflects the fascist's resentment of history. If capitalism contains "the seeds of its own destruction," then the fascist's enemy is history inasmuch as the development of capitalism signals the demise of class privilege.

The anti-Semite is the victim of a similar resentment and blind-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ness. Chamberlain is enraged by the Jewish belief that the Kingdom of God would be a historical, earthly kingdom:

> But the Jew lived only in history, . . . and so he judges a phenomenon like the revelation of Christ from a purely historical standpoint, and became justly filled with fury, when the promised kingdom, to win which he had suffered and endured for centuries—for the sake of possessing which he had separated himself from all people on the earth, and had become hated and despised of all—when this kingdom, in which he hoped to see all nations in fetters and all princes upon their knees "licking the dust", was all at once transformed into one "not of this world."

The belief that the Kingdom of God is not entailed in the Jewish Law results from an inability to see a causal relationship, one that takes place in time.

The point of confluence of anti-Semitism, fascism, and Social Credit occupies the center of Pound's consciousness, and that center is the attitude toward history and time just delineated. It is not a new idea to suggest that Pound had an overarching concern with time. Daniel Pearlman has said:

> Pound was setting himself the considerable task of discovering the first principles of human behavior. If, in working toward this goal, he felt with greater and greater urgency the need to determine the nature of time, it is probable that he felt it to be a question of fundamental importance, not only to the poet but to humanity at large.

Pearlman feels that Pound's attitude towards time resulted from his creative methods and intentions. On the contrary, I would suggest that Pound's understanding of time is the *a priori* element in his thought and colors those methods and intentions. It is discernible in every aspect of Pound's creative work from his poetic syntax to his theory of culture. Understanding Pound's attitude towards time is not simply a noncontroversial tool for evaluating those equally noncontroversial methods and intentions, but is itself a method for questioning those methods and intentions and for examining the social role of the poet and poetry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eugene Goodheart

ALL OUR CITIES

The occasion was unprecedented. On its 350th anniversary Boston was the host of a week-long conference of representatives (many of them mayors) of "the great cities of the world." Never before had so many mayors (thirty-odd) and city representatives from all over the world come together to discuss the modern city. The conference was partly funded by a federal grant and donations by local hotels and private citizens. The trips were paid for by the mayors or by their cities. The schedule consisted of panels, walks, a visit to the waterfront, a boat trip in Boston harbor, and parties large and small. Though the principal hosts (apart from the city of Boston) were M.I.T. and Harvard and the five days were mostly occupied by panel discussions, the conference, as one might expect, had very little intellectual substance. The mayors for the most part ignored the problems posed for the panel discussions (city design to deal with ethnic conflict, preserving the city's past while using contemporary design, cities growing on their outskirts, etc.) and used the opportunity given to them to puff up their own cities. The experience of sitting through the panels was often not unlike evenings spent with friends who have just returned from foreign lands and are eager to show off their slides. ("Problems? Must be some other city," a *Boston Globe* headline aptly remarked.)

Many of the representatives were clearly "provincial" politicians unused to the international stage and a number did not speak English. It is doubtful whether most of the delegates had a genuine knowledge of the basic facts of most of the other cities. What river runs through Lisbon? What is the name of the famous lake of Hangzhou? What are the "sister" cities of El Paso, San Diego, Johannesburg? The audience was given a telescoped round-the-world tour.

Problems inevitably emerged from the presentations and attitudes, if not serious intellectual speculation. The specter haunting many of the cities (Caracas and Bombay spoke with particular poignancy) is overcrowding. The need to disperse the population and to attract people to places outside the city implies political and economic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

approaches that were never taken up. No one considered the alternatives of democratic versus authoritarian or capitalist versus socialist solutions. The festive, courteous spirit tended to depoliticize the occasion. Moreover, one had the feeling that the mayors had almost erased their political affiliations. For the duration of the conference, their identities as mayors of large cities constituted a community that transcended political differences.

On one occasion the harmony was disturbed by the innocent intrusion of an academic presentation. In attempting to provide a background for the discussion of cultural and ethnic conflict, Professor Julian Beinart of the department of urban planning at M.I.T. offered a number of "models": Johannesburg-Soweto (white and black), El Paso-Juarez and San Diego-Tiajuana (two nations), Havana (city and country) and Delhi (colonialist and native). In each case, one city or group within a city was privileged at the expense of the other. The grandeur of Johannesburg (the city of gold) in contrast to the squalor of Soweto was immediately evident from slides Beinart showed, as was the vitality of El Paso in contrast to the poverty of Juarez. The presentation immediately produced an angry reaction from a Mexican delegate who attacked the hapless professor as a racist. Perhaps there was an asymmetry in the contrasting slides (we were never shown a slide of downtown Juarez) but the professor was clearly not tendentious as charged. He was rather academical (in a good sense) and innocent of the political resonances which the Mexican delegate chose to hear. There is a sensitivity (more or less developed) on the part of people from underdeveloped places to any critical analysis of their problems unaccompanied by a condemnation of exploitation. The reaction, however, was quickly defused by an Indian delegate, who spoke with some anguish of the need to face problems and by the moderator who wanted the conference to flow smoothly.

Differences were muted, confrontation avoided. The mayor of Montréal spoke of his city as an enviable place. Every construction (whether in housing, commerce, or transportation) was a glorious achievement. One would not have guessed at the presence of a French-English conflict. The mayor of Hong Kong presented an urban idyl: sports arenas, swimming pools, cultural centers, multipurpose housing projects with every conceivable facility. There is no ethnic conflict in Hong Kong, which, according to its mayor, is a wholly successful "melting pot." The mayor of Hong Kong was followed by Teddy Kollek, who said gently but firmly that Jerusalem was by tradition and desire not a melting pot. The ethnic and religious groups that compose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it—Jews, Moslems, Christians, Abyssinians, Copts—are themselves subject to further division. For example, the Ashkenazi and Sephardim live separately and pursue their own lives. But the conflict is one of aspiration, not daily life. Kollek made one of the rare introductions of political considerations in solving or not solving an urban problem. The Moslem quarter is overcrowded, but the authorities hesitate to move the Moslems out of the inner city for fear that the move will be interpreted as an attempt to rid Jerusalem of a section of the Moslem population and thus consolidate Israeli control. In the spirit of the conference, Kollek's presentation was equanimous, undisturbed by what the media tell us about the current stress and distress of Jerusalem.

The intellectual high point of the conference was a confrontation between James Rowse, the distinguished planner who created Faneuil Hall and the Baltimore waterfront and Jane Jacobs, the author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Rowse argued for "big plans," quoting nineteenth century planner Daniel Burnham ("make no little plans, for they have no magic to stir men's minds"). The "big plan" provides a "rational," comprehensive image for a city. Rowse cited in particular a plan for a new capital city in Tanzania and a plan in Staten Island for a 300,000 person new community. Jane Jacobs responded by characterizing big plans, any big plan, as a mistake, the effect of which is to stifle alternatives by pre-empting most, if not all the space, for making future changes. Rowse's radical liberalism is conservative, even reactionary, in the sense that comprehensive change tends to bind the future, producing an idiocy of urban life. (Jacobs proposed the analogy of the uncle in a comic novel who attaches strings to a legacy that misshapes the life of the heir.) Jacobs' conservative caution, which declares itself for piecemeal change ("life is an ad hoc affair"), is motivated by a kind of radicalism which wants to guarantee an open space for improvisation and change. Like the neolithic conservative Paul Goodman, Jacobs wishes to protect the impulse for change against its possibly noxious consequences. (Apropos of a comment about the need for new urban models by Moshe Safdie, director of urban design at Harvard, Jacobs remarked to the delight of her audience: "Cities won't be humanized by conceiving new urban models at Harvard.") Those in attendance at the session in Faneuil Hall were clearly with the more persuasive Jane Jacobs. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity for applying the difference of view to specific cases. The opposition remained abstract. How little is little, how big big? Are there situations where a big plan is required, for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

instance, in the creation of a new capital? Jacobs, it seems evident, had developed cities in mind. Rowse clearly did not mean to—or have to—tear down old Boston in order to redevelop Faneuil Hall. He preserved while making changes. What was instructive, nevertheless, was the difference in mental set between Jacobs and Rowse. The cautionary, improvisatory Jacobs was clearly the more congenial spirit.

It is noteworthy that the mayor of Toronto, where Jane Jacobs now lives, was hostile in his presentation to big plans and large scale innovative changes. His principal achievement has been the development of moderate income housing at the edge of the city, which simply continues the small, "human scale" yet diverse construction of the nineteenth century buildings that already characterize the city. The mayor was mistrustful of the private sector, which tends to scant moderate income housing as unprofitable, of planners, whose predilection for a showy modernism makes them indifferent to the real needs of the people, and of politicians, who are often ignorant of what has to be done. The mayor insisted that his planners work together with the people in the neighborhood. He presented a cozy, watered-down antimodernist version of Jane Jacobs's view.

Jacobs said that she almost never attends conferences because she finds them solemn, unilluminating affairs, concerned not so much with cities as with the problems of cities, or rather with fashions in thinking about the problems of cities. She spoke, however, of her enjoyment of this conference, because of the presence of the mayors, who were characters and characters in love with their cities. I suspect that the charm of the mayors was more in evidence in the private encounters and conversations that occurred between and after the panels.

Cities are places where people live at a certain intellectual and emotional intensity. The streets of the city are not simply conduits for traffic in which one gets from point A to point B. They have a life (charming and macabre) of their own, which Baudelaire celebrated through the eyes of the *flaneur* in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The city is not only the breeding ground of Culture and Art: it contributes to the formation of their character. Given the problems of the cities, some of them of potentially catastrophic proportions, it may be difficult to sustain such a vision.

On occasion, however, one glimpsed the city as other than problem even in the presentation of the problem. The Governor of Alexandria presented a comic picture of frustration. Bounded by the Mediterranean on the north and by a river on the south, Alexandria can

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only build its houses east and west. But when Alexandrians dig, they discover a Roman amphitheater that must be preserved; when they move east or west away from the ruin, they run into a mosque. Alexandria is the captive of its past, but for all the comic frustration the governor could not conceal his pride in the splendor of that past. In contrast, the delegate from Warsaw presented a view of a city solemnly determined to recreate its history out of the rubble of World War II as if its self-esteem depended upon its capacity to revive historic Warsaw. The most eloquent and entertaining presentation was by the city manager of Dublin. Joyce, O'Casey, and Brendan Behan entered his speech evocatively, comically. (Behan: "The city is a place where one is not afraid of being attacked by a wild sheep.") The Dublin representative alone revealed both literacy and a literary sense. But the eloquence of the manager could not redeem the rather dreary slides of Dublin redevelopment. The beauty of Irish speech has not found its way into the physical look of the city: indeed, perhaps literature compensates for its architectural dreariness. Yet the city manager, commenting apropos of a slide depicting a drinker in a pub, showed a sensitivity to the common life of Dublin, how it feels to be alive in a city, missing from most of the presentations.

In the face of the variety of situations and problems posed by the conference (problems posed despite the impulse to evade them), most mayors and delegates exhibited a commendable modesty and flexibility. A city with a homogeneous population requires a different approach from one with a heterogeneous population. A city with a rich heritage proposes different burdens and opportunities from a city with a short history. There was a marked unwillingness to decide for or against public investment as a general policy for all cities, though Edward Logue, who headed the Boston Redevelopment Authority and now is in charge of redevelopment in South Bronx, characterized the end of the urban renewal program, based on federal aid, as a repressive step, inimical to the interests of American cities. For the most part, the delegates were interested in stimulating and mixing the various sectors of the economy.

Teddy Kollek remarked in the course of his presentation that a conference succeeds if one comes away with one or two good ideas. It is probable that the mayors of Nairobi, Hangzhou, Caracas, Athens and Baltimore (to cite at random cities of the various continents) did learn a thing or two from the conference. Already there was talk of turning the conference into a movable feast in other cities.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VARIETY

Roberta Satow

NARCISSISM OR INDIVIDUALISM?

The current popularity of the concept of narcissism in both psychoanalytic and lay circles has resulted in some confusion. The term itself has been defined and interpreted so broadly in its popular use that it is difficult to find a cultural or psychological phenomenon that cannot be described by some version of it. While psychoanalysts use several different clinical definitions of narcissism, more generalistic social commentaries blur its meaning by using the term in a generic way as a synonym for self-absorption or preoccupation with the self.

Freud used the concept of narcissism in at least four different ways. Initially, he discussed narcissism within the context of libido theory, as energy directed toward one's own ego, as opposed to objects. From a developmental point of view, Freud viewed primary narcissism as the original state of libidinal cathexis of the ego, while secondary narcissism referred to a state in which the libido which had once cathected objects is withdrawn into the ego. Freud also used narcissism to refer to a type of object choice in which the basis for the choice is identification with some aspect of the self—either real or imagined. Finally, Freud related narcissism and self-esteem, proposing that self-esteem is rooted in the relationship between the ego ideal and the ego: if the individual is not able to transcend the narcissistic perfection of his early childhood, he displaces this early narcissism onto an ego ideal. It was this brief discussion that led later theorists to develop the concept of narcissism as a problem in establishing and maintaining self-esteem.

Between 1914 and 1950 there were no major additions to Freud's theories on narcissism. Since 1950, however, there has been a change in the emphasis in discussions of narcissism on two levels. First, current psychoanalytic thought tends to emphasize narcissism as a way of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

relating to objects rather than to the term's other uses. This probably reflects the current influence of object relations theory in psychoanalytic thought in general. Second, contemporary theorists distinguish between people with narcissistic problems and conflicts (which all patients in every diagnostic category have to one degree or another), and those who have narcissistic personality disorders. This type of disorder is characterized by the formation of relationships in which what seems to be a relationship between self and object is actually between one aspect of the self and another. The primitive, grandiose self is projected onto objects and then identified with. Narcissism, therefore, is not necessarily being unrelated to an object. Rather, the issue is whether the object is a self-object (i.e., part of the ego) or a part of the external world. Thus, while narcissism originally referred to an absence of, or a withdrawal from object relations, it no longer refers to the individual's *behavior* toward objects in the external world, but rather to internal object representations.

Considering the specificity and variety of meanings that narcissism has in psychoanalytic circles, it is perplexing that popular writers have unhesitatingly adopted the term. Richard Sennett and Christopher Lasch, for example, refer to the work of Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg despite the fact that the social phenomena they discuss are not related to the psychoanalytic meanings of the term *narcissism*. Ironically, Sennett and Lasch point to the psychological perspective pervasive in our society as one of the reflections of its narcissism. Yet, by using the term *narcissism*, these writers are themselves guilty of the same sin which they bemoan in the rest of society: they are explaining a social phenomenon in psychological terms, and by doing so they are obscuring both the concept of narcissism and the social phenomenon they hope to explain.*

Perhaps more important, the popular notion that narcissism involves concern with feelings, health, sex, or a retreat from the public sector bears no resemblance to the narcissistic character disorders described by Kernberg and Kohut. The point is not so much *what* objects or activities one is involved with, but *how* one relates to these

*Sennett and Lasch claim that just as hysteria was the prevailing form of neurosis in the nineteenth century, so narcissism is the prevalent form of disorder now. This is a startling claim since the NIMH reports that the most commonly diagnosed conditions in all psychiatric facilities in the United States are depressive disorders in women and alcoholism in men.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

objects on an intrapsychic level. Narcissism is a psychopathology that cannot be diagnosed by behavior, but only through understanding the person's unconscious relationship to others.

There is no doubt that the disparate cultural phenomena social commentators are calling narcissism—the retreat from activity in the public sector into a concern with psychic and physical health—does exist, but if we call this *individualism* instead of narcissism, little about it seems new. Sennett comes close to this realization in his discussion of narcissism as the new version of the Protestant Ethic. He argues that the Protestant Ethic led to the erosion of belief in external experience and authority because it denied the privileged status of any religious institution.

It is precisely this peculiar characteristic of Protestantism that led Durkheim to conclude that it does not fit the functional definition of a religion, because it emphasizes the individual rather than the collective conscience. This is why the Protestant Ethic and capitalism fit together so well—the self becomes the arbiter of reality; working for the glory of God reflects the individual's state of grace. This kind of inner worldly asceticism, as described by Max Weber, focuses attention on the self as opposed to any collectivity such as the church.

This was Durkheim's concern in his writings on organic solidarity. He warned that all the institutions of moral authority, such as the church, guild, and extended family, had declined, leaving us in a state of anomie in which we are unwilling to subordinate our self-interest to the interest of the collectivity. Modern capitalism, according to Durkheim, has led to the destruction of all traditional forms of social control, so that people find themselves relatively free from constraints, except the constraint against wanting more; capitalism, he said, encourages limitless appetites.

Durkheim realized this at the turn of the century. What is new, then, in what Sennett and Lasch (or, for that matter, Peter Marin and Tom Wolfe) are describing? It seems to be the shift in emphasis: from self-interest discussed in exclusively economic terms to self-interest as it appears in noneconomic spheres.

Earlier capitalist ideology assured us that anyone could become a president or a millionaire and that if we did not it was because of a lack of ability or moral fiber. Now we are assured that we have endless personal and emotional potential and that if we do not develop it the fault is our own. The ascetic aspect of American individualism remains. Although we may be competing for orgasms instead of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

money, too often there is no pleasure involved, only the moralistic compulsion to do everything possible to develop our potential.

The current emphasis on fulfilling one's potential is not new in American culture. The literature of the first half of the twentieth century is filled with the happy messages of positive thinkers. Optimistic inspirational literature has been widely published and read throughout the century. The current self-help and awareness groups are merely a new reflection of the paradoxical relationship between the pursuit of individual interests and the public good that has existed in American culture since its beginning and was evident to its early observers, such as de Tocqueville. The current version plays down the conventional work ethic and competition for money and success and emphasizes competition for experiences. Similarly, just as the Protestant Ethic of individualism obscured the structural aspects of inequality, the new awareness gurus tell us that oppression is simply a state of mind, thus denying the structural, culturally reinforced origins of oppression and inequality. The specific content has changed, but the ideological function remains the same.

In *The Awareness Trap,* Edwin Schur points out that those social commentators who analyze this change in American-brand individualism as if it were a distinctly new phenomenon overlook the fact that "the quasi-religious dogma of optimistic individualism . . . has always sold well in America. It appeals almost exclusively to the middle and upper classes; it is politically innocuous and socially complacent. . . ." The attempt to analyze the current American scene in terms of narcissism is itself a reflection of individualism, though of a different sort. It focuses on self-indulgence as the core of the problem and implies that since our problems arise from purely individual foibles, we can, *as individuals,* solve them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS

ISAIAH BERLIN'S ESSAYS

AGAINST THE CURRENT: ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS. By Isaiah Berlin. Viking Press. $16.95.

"What do you teach?"
"History."
"What kind of history?"
"Intellectual history."
"Oh, I see. . . . Eh, what's that?"

If writing intellectual history is, as someone once quipped, like nailing jelly to a wall, trying to define the discipline is even more difficult when the wall itself can no longer be taken for granted as objective reality. No doubt the chaotic ferment in the discipline today is due to the precarious status of both intellect and idea, the former no longer regarded as a rational faculty capable of apprehending truth, the latter no longer a form or symbol capable of representing it. Sir Isaiah Berlin is too mature a thinker to suffer from the epistemological nightmares that afflict the theorists of history and literature in our time. Indeed it is to his credit that he can write so confidently about the great thinkers of the past in full knowledge of the impasse at which modern thought finds itself. While philosophers may persist in asking questions about their own questions, Berlin long ago gave up the study of philosophy to explore the history of ideas. One gathers that he finds some consolation in the fact that "reality" had been a central problem in Machiavelli's Florence and Vico's Naples centuries before it became a fashionable "problematic" in Wittgenstein's Vienna or Sartre's Paris. *Against the Current*, the third of a projected four volume collection of Berlin's essays, presents old-fashioned intellectual history in the very best sense of the term: rethinking the thoughts of other thinkers. Its reception in America may reflect the disarray of the discipline in this country more than the luminous quality and genius of the work itself.

Intellectual history developed relatively late in the United States. Although practiced much earlier, the discipline did not become professionally recognized until the appearance of *The Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940. The main spirit behind that distinguished journal was Arthur O. Lovejoy, pioneer of the "history of ideas"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

approach to the study of cultures past and present. "At no moment, indeed, in the life of the race has the pertinency of the Delphian imperative been more tragically apparent," wrote Lovejoy in the politically tragic year of 1940. Isaiah Berlin fully shares Lovejoy's conviction that the history of ideas affords useful self-knowledge as well as perspective. Berlin, however, is too much of an essayist and moralist to be categorized as a strict Lovejoyian, a methodologist who aims to discriminate among the uses of ideas and concepts and to sort out ambiguities and enumerate meanings. Lovejoy had argued that the historian should analyze "unit-ideas" in terms of their component elements to show what characteristics certain ideas have in common. In 1941, in a seminal essay on "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas," he suggested that German Romanticism was an important factor in producing "a state of mind upon which the totalitarian ideologies depend for their appeal." The controversial idea that ideas could cause ideas and shape mentalities, which in turn could produce events and reshape reality, was a bit much for both Marxist materialists and pragmatic naturalists—though one suspects that as authors both Karl Marx and John Dewey would agree, as would Berlin.

Today it is difficult to say anything by way of demonstrating or denying such claims since much of contemporary intellectual history no longer seems to take the external world as its object of study. Historians influenced by structuralism tend to treat the external social order as governed by rules inaccessible to the activity of mind—though not necessarily their minds. Contextualists maintain that an idea takes on meaning not because it may illuminate aspects of social or political reality but rather because it reflects the political or linguistic conditions from which it arose. Psychohistorians, moving from the "external" to the "internal" explanation of ideas, probe the unspoken motives behind beliefs held by thinkers in the past; and thus a philosopher like William James, for example, is seen as affirming the proposition of freedom by reaffirming his will to believe in it as a means not so much of resolving the theoretical problem as winning his struggle for personal autonomy against his father's powerful influence. Then there are the "metahistorians," those who equate historical understanding with the literary forms of historical narrative and thereby locate the meaning of past experience in the modes of its expression in a given historical text. Was the French Revolution tragedy, irony, or farce? In all these new approaches to intellectual history where the object of discourse is no longer regarded as equally as important as its context, "ideas" ain't what they used to be.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Berlin has managed to stay above the theoretical battles that have characterized the writing of political and social ideas in the last several decades. Perhaps one reason he can transcend all camps is that he simply knows too much to get involved in disputes that even the intellectual giants of the past could not resolve. Consider, for example, the question of whether the intellectual historian should concern himself with trying to disclose the perennial issues and timeless truths of political texts or whether he should study the historical context which presumably brought the texts into being. This battle between the ancients and the moderns, between those who, like the late Leo Strauss and his students, want to elucidate moral truths, and those who, like Quentin Skinner and the contextualists, want to provide factual knowledge, represents the struggle between two incompatible value systems that may reside within the mind of a single thinker. Berlin makes this clear in his essay on Montesquieu, a philosopher who desired to equate law with the "eternal" principle of justice as a "necessity of nature," and a social scientist determined to demonstrate that the "spirit of laws" reflected the changing moral habits and beliefs of particular societies. Even during the Enlightenment the philosophy of truth could not survive the sociology of knowledge.

Although the kind of intellectual history Berlin prefers to write has never been satisfactorily defined, it is possible to note three themes that run through the corpus of his works as well as the collected essays in *Against the Current*. First of all, in contrast to the trendy structuralists who have called for a history without a subject, Berlin has always held, as did Hannah Arendt, that the thinking subject is both the agent and mirror of human consciousness. Michel Foucault concluded *Order of Things* with the chilling observation that if the categories by which man constitutes himself continue to crumble, "then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." Confronted by such brooding nihilism, it is heartening to have Berlin remind us that it is the problems man discovers, and not necessarily resolves, that command our respect; and in his essays Berlin dramatizes elegantly that moment of discovery by thinkers who must think against the current to overturn assumptions, what social scientists would call, less elegantly, "paradigms." Foucault desires to see man's mind "erased" because of the "scandal" of knowledge, the historical spectacle of a human mind that cannot penetrate objective reality. To Berlin it is the glory of the human mind that it continues to pursue that which it cannot claim to possess. ("Mind," Trotsky once wrote, "limps after reality.") The great intellects are, for Berlin, not the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

system builders like Hegel or the deconstructionists like Foucault but the anguished humanists like Vico, Machiavelli, and Tolstoy, heroic skeptics who realize the necessity of acting without absolute convictions and of coping with a universe that has been eclipsed in moral darkness.

A second theme in Berlin's essays is the gap between the natural and the human world, a dualism that renders impossible a single logic of explanation that can encompass human activity as well as natural processes. Thinkers as diverse as Condorcet, Buckle, and Marx believed that human society could be studied with the methods of natural science. But Berlin sides with those who took pains to distinguish the natural from the human world, that which can be investigated empirically from the "outside," and that which requires a more aesthetic and moral form of "inside" understanding, an empathy and imagination that can deal with motives, purposes, hopes, fears, loves, hates, the meaning of "what men did and thought and suffered."

A third theme in Berlin's works is the implicit connection of philosophical skepticism to political liberalism. In his now classic essay, "Two Concepts of Freedom," Berlin maintained that the "positive" notion of freedom, which reflects man's desire for self-transcendence, can easily lead the citizenry to identify with some authoritarian doctrine or movement, whereas the "negative" concept, in which man is left relatively free to pursue his diverse activities, affords the right and ability to resist authority and despotism even if it provides no means for overcoming human alienation. The distinction between freedom "for" and freedom "against" is rooted in Berlin's conviction that history has no teleological purpose, least of all the goal of absolute freedom for which we might be led to relinquish our immediate civil liberties. This theme has generally been associated with modern British political thought, but Berlin shows how even the implications of classical Renaissance philosophy can lead to pluralism. Machiavelli's skepticism about final solutions in human affairs opened the way for empiricism, toleration, and compromise. "Toleration is historically the product of the realisation of the irreconcilability of equally dogmatic faiths, and the practical improbability of complete victory of one over the other."

While Berlin's writings have done much to enrich liberal political thought, one cannot be completely persuaded that skepticism represents an entirely adequate stance. Does it follow that the idea of liberty has been nurtured primarily by those who denied the possibility of obtaining certain knowledge and ultimate solutions? The Declaration

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Independence rests on "undeniable" and "self-evident" truths. In American intellectual history Berlin's categories do not seem to work well. Indeed some of the most profound American expressions of freedom came from a writer who offered both a "positive" message for overcoming alienation by virtue of mind's ability to realize its "divine self," and a "negative" strategy for resisting the encroachments of the state by virtue of mind's ability to take its own stand against the molestations of society—Thoreau's *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience.* Berlin remains convinced that Machiavelli's wisdom lies not in discovering the reality of power but in recognizing as an "insoluble dilemma" that there are no real answers to basic problems and thus "those who wished to survive had to tolerate error." "This," Berlin observes, "is the dagger of which Meinecke speaks, with which Machiavelli inflicted the wound that has never healed." One might add that Lincoln helped heal that wound by bringing back into politics the very Christian moralism that Machiavelli had purged from his theory of statecraft. "God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time," Lincoln wrote on the eve of the Civil War. On moral issues like slavery Machiavelli's "realism" may tolerate evil as well as error. "We have to fight this battle upon principle and upon principle alone," Lincoln reminded America.

Students of American culture may also find it difficult to share Berlin's enthusiasm for Giambattista Vico, the hero of the volume of essays. Berlin celebrates Vico's startling claim that while we cannot know the world of nature because it is God-made, we can know the human and social world in so far as we have created it. It is not only that the founding fathers saw no distinction between the laws of nature and those of God. More troublesome is the fact that the natural world remains accessible to scientific investigation only to the extent that its animistic and spiritual attributes have been demystified, while the man-made world remains almost inscrutable precisely because human activity refuses to reveal its ambiguous motives and purposes. A Vichian would regard as incomprehensible the natural behavior of the white whale, not the tortured imagination of he who pursued it. Vico needs to be revised by Melville: with God dead, man is the problem, and that is the deeper "wound."

JOHN PATRICK DIGGINS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE INFLATION OF THEORY

DECONSTRUCTION AND CRITICISM. By Harold Bloom et al. Seabury Press. $16.95.

SPURS: NIETZSCHE'S STYLES. By Jacques Derrida. Translated by Barbara Harlow. University of Chicago Press. $8.95.

A THEORY OF LITERARY PRODUCTION. By Pierre Macherey. Translated by Geoffrey Wall. Routledge and Kegan Paul. $19.75.

After inconclusive battles over structuralism, academic critics are now fighting about "deconstruction." *Deconstruction and Criticism* aims to be a report from the trenches. Its chief dispatches are essays by Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, the inventors of deconstruction. A Nietzschean edition of ancient skepticism, it holds that language does not convey meaning, but complicates and ultimately cancels it. Words lead only to other words, not to a speaking "self" nor a world or ideas spoken about. What then is language like? Derrida recalls a graffito, "Don't read this." The sentence performs the act of commanding, and so does not refer to anything. In order to grasp the order and obey it, you must already have disobeyed it. Deconstructors have shown considerable ingenuity in inventing an analytic rhetoric that can reduce every text to just such a self-canceling, self-referential paradox. In *Spurs,* Derrida muses for a dozen pages over a scrap found among Nietzsche's papers, on which was written, "I have forgotten my umbrella," in quotation marks. Was this a quotation from a book? A report of an overheard conversation? An example to be used in some argument? Perhaps Nietzsche really had forgotten his umbrella. The scrap is undated and unsigned, so we cannot be absolutely sure where or when it was written nor even whether Nietzsche wrote it. Perhaps, Derrida ponders, Nietzsche's whole works are just like this: you can question them endlessly, but never decide anything.

Deconstruction's conception of language and literature are, I think, wrong. De Man and Derrida do not account—they don't even try—for our ordinary, successful use of language to communicate about a shared world, nor do they account for the self-reference which is essential to their reading of texts. But even literature has two faces—the network of connections from word to word and the usage by which words bind users and the world. Déconstruction seems plausible because it carries into critical theory an extreme version of some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

familiar themes from Romantic and post-Romantic literature. In *Deconstruction and Criticism* de Man proves at length what everybody knew, that Shelley despaired of conveying his meaning or "vision" through the imperfect medium of language. By implication, deconstruction courageously faces what poets have always known, as though Shelley's romantic cliché were a universal truth. In a long-winded and archly written commentary on some narratives by Maurice Blanchot, Derrida usefully makes explicit Blanchot's themes and techniques, though he recognizes that some of his interpretations have no support in the text. But again nothing justifies leaping from Blanchot's narrative theories or practice to the universal claim that "all organized narration is 'a matter for the police,'" that is, an "authoritarian demand" imposed by coercive social institutions.

De Man and Derrida exploit a confusion between a tendentious thematic commentary and the assertion of general doctrines which could only be established by quite different arguments. If a text delivers no single doctrine, as de Man and Derrida think, then their readings have no special authority over other, more traditional interpretations, and cannot be cited as proof of any general theory. What stands in place of argument is a specious "logical diction." We are repeatedly told that the deconstructor is laying bare what "all writing" has "always" done, what "every utterance" must be, what "no word" can do. We are assured that terms are being taken "in a rigorous sense," that "necessary" consequences are being drawn, that the deconstructor merely spells out "the law" which is manifest in a text or that he shows us "the truth that is announced" there. But these are forms of self-congratulation, not arguments. Deconstruction willfully ignores the variety both of language and literature. If a proposition like "the cat is on the mat" is too narrow to serve as a model of all language, so is the rhetorical figure of irony or the "Cretan liar" paradox. What is wrong with deconstructive reading may be suggested by an analogy I borrow from Stanislaw Lem's novel *The Chain of Chance*. A half-tone photograph is printed by varying the density of black dots. If you enlarge the photograph to examine a detail, the "picture" disappears, leaving only dots. Deconstructors pride themselves on their close scrutiny of texts, which "takes seriously" their language and rhetoric. But in fact they simply isolate fragments and embed them in an alien discourse, whose presuppositions and dogmas are hidden behind a smoke screen of word play.

Derrida's *Spurs*, badly translated and disastrously proofread, is a sixty-page commentary on various remarks by Nietzsche on "woman." A quotation will give the flavor:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property. And the philosophical discourse, blinded, founders on these shoals and is hurled down these depthless depths to its ruin. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth, because that untruth is "truth." Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth.

What siren song lures people onto these reefs of nonsense? The essay wends its mind-numbing way to the conclusion that those who believe in truth, science, and objectivity are castrated old dogmatists, whereas deconstructors make better lovers, because they understand that women are incomprehensible.

Why all this is taken seriously by American academics is hard to see, and the other essays in *Deconstruction and Criticism* do not help. Geoffrey Hartman presents a tortured reading of Wordsworth to prove you don't *have* to deconstruct, though I cannot explain why he is so timid about asserting this plain truth. Harold Bloom rightly objects that deconstruction is unhistorical and that it monotonously finds the same lesson in every text, and yet regards it as the only worthy rival of his own well-known theory of influence. J. Hillis Miller quotes M. H. Abrams's quotation of Wayne Booth's claim that deconstructive interpretation is parasitical on the common sense interpretation. Miller replies with some irrelevant fooling around on the etymology of "parasite" before splitting the difference and conceding that deconstruction also sets up "definitive" interpretations, but simultaneously undermines them. The attractions of skepticism have been explained sociologically by Gerald Graff: a philosophy of powerlessness suits an increasingly marginal intelligentsia which has lost confidence. Certainly de Man's and Derrida's chatter about death, violence, sex, and the void might give a transitory thrill to a numbed academic, long cloistered among adolescents. But it is depressing that anyone would cheer an attack on truth, objectivity, facts, seriousness, and common sense. This is an old game of European intellectuals, who vent their resentment against "bourgeois hypocrisy" by purveying a subversive rhetoric and driving politics to a stark opposition between absolutism and anarchy. At the same time these bold thinkers have somehow not gotten around to deconstructing the text of Marx or Engels or Lenin or even the marxist aesthetics of Lukacs, Adorno, or Marcuse or the faceless formulators of Soviet "cultural policy." The issue here is not evenhandedness, but political naivety.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* appeared in 1966, the year before Derrida launched deconstruction by publishing three books, including *Of Grammatology*. Some polemical pages against Barthes and an inconclusive essay on Borges might be read as anticipatory replies to deconstruction. A marxist is hardly likely to leave unchallenged a theory which claims that texts lift themselves by their own bootstraps into the celestial void of cancelled meaning. Macherey's mentor was Louis Althusser, who in the early sixties was busy re-inventing marxism and passing off his own theories as a new reading of Marx, radically original because utterly faithful. The application of Althusserian theories of reading to literary criticism was inevitable. Macherey's writing is predictably awful. He never sinks to the leaden tedium of Derrida's baroque verbal shenanigans, but the cause of the bad writing is the same: an indiscriminate ambition to be "clever." What makes Macherey's application of Althusser interesting is that he abandons the traditional defense of realism, long synonymous with marxist criticism, and instead adopts—with polemical feints to cover his tracks—a modernist, formalist conception of the literary work. It is autonomous, complex, contradictory (Cleanth Brooks said "ironic"), and qualifies and tests mere ideas about experience ("ideology") by submitting them to the transmuting power of form and dramatic perspective. The author's problem is not simply to reflect reality, but to make a literary work, and in this labor he uses forms bequeathed by earlier authors. Consequently, in some sense all works are about the drama of their own creation.

Macherey attempts to graft this conception of literature onto marxism by denying a single formalist dogma, unity. If present reality can be captured in a unified, complete image, then change is unintelligible. But history dynamically moves toward the classless society and human liberation, impelled by real contradictions. Literature registers this dynamism, but by means of its own specific, autonomous contradictions. Macherey finds these in a clash between the author's "ideological project," his deliberate intention to reflect his times, and his choice of formal means from the repertoire of literary history. In a long reading of Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, Macherey tries to show how an intent to exhibit man's conquest of nature by science is tested by Verne's choice of a form derived from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Macherey is too narrow—Goethe's *Faust* and the romantic cult of genius also lie behind Verne. But his point is to prove that when ideological intention and formal means are brought together, both are dialectically transformed in a way that illuminates the author's histori-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cal moment. Unhappily, the pages where this demonstration is undertaken mix murky critical abstraction with cliches about nineteenth century history. Analyzing Verne teaches Macherey nothing he did not already know, vitiating his claim that literature is somehow specially revealing, second only to the blazing light shed by marxist "scientific" analysis.

The trouble here, hardly disguised, is that Macherey is devoted first of all to his theory. He can go on for pages decreeing what literature must or must not be on purely theoretical grounds, without once looking to see what it is. He devotes a chapter to a half dozen insignificant newspaper articles by Lenin on Tolstoy, claiming that they pose and solve all the problems of literary criticism. Lenin's essays are not wrong or stupid, just meanly narrow. He does not really care about Tolstoy, he only cares about politics and denouncing the Vekhists, whoever they were. Macherey evades this evasion by writing about Jules Verne, a disposable author he does not have to care about. Verne is just an example. Despite some good pages, the book's flaw is that it wants to *use* literature, to sign it up for the Party. Literature's victory is that dogmatists should still feel the need to make the attempt.

DONALD G. MARSHALL

WINNERS AND LOSERS

THE ZERO-SUM SOCIETY: DISTRIBUTION AND THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ECONOMIC CHANGE. By Lester C. Thurow. Basic Books. $12.95.

In "an economy that has a substantial zero-sum element," Massachusetts Institute of Technology economics professor Lester Thurow informs us, "for every winner there is a loser." Even when the burdens of progress are smaller than the overall benefits, they always generate losses for certain individuals or groups. The income distribution is altered, in ways which hurt someone. What makes the American economic predicament so unyielding, however, is that loss allocation can no longer be mediated through political institutions: potential "losers" can safeguard their interests by blocking economic growth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

itself. "To protect our own income, we will fight to stop economic change from occurring or fight to prevent society from imposing the public policies that hurt us."

The current catalog of economic dilemmas is a thick one, a veritable guide to "an economy that no longer performs": oil dependency and runaway energy costs, double-digit inflation, lagging productivity and investment, environmental deterioration. The problems are "solvable," Thurow insists, but for each, the solution requires decisions that redistribute income in zero-sum fashion. Nobody will volunteer for the loser's role, "and we have a political process that is incapable of forcing anyone to shoulder this burden." Hence, we have a system unable to make the hard decisions needed to stem economic decline.

While Thurow may not interpret it that way, his description of economic-political stalemate rests on an implicit equilibrium model. It recalls, for me, John Kenneth Galbraith's "countervailing power" scheme of 1952, recast to fit an era of limits and adversary relationships rather than the age of the seemingly boundless economic growth that overtook a Depression-haunted generation in the 1950s. It suffers from the same weaknesses. American society certainly can be viewed as a congeries of embattled interest groups. But whether the outcome is seen as pluralist consensus, mutually offsetting power-bloc alignments, or zero-sum immobility, a higher order of power is missing from the equation. Above the fray, presiding over the limits and substance of any equilibrium, stands an interlocking community of interests based on corporate economic expansion.

Thurow responds, in effect, by claiming that during the past fifteen years of unparalleled peacetime inflation "there has been essentially no change in the distribution of income between rich and poor." This presumably attests to the ability of formerly powerless groups (minorities, women, environmental defenders, neighborhoods) to ward off threats to their economic security, by obtaining annual wage increases, putting legal obstacles in the path of corporations and government bodies, lobbying for federal regulations and income maintenance programs, and other means. Without touching off an extended squabble over statistics, I can only register my surprise at Thurow's cursory treatment of the impact of this inflation. Comparing six-year periods before and after 1972, he reports that the standard of living for "the average American" has been rising steadily, regardless of the rate of inflation: real disposable income per capita increased 17 percent from 1966 to 1972, and 16 percent between 1972 and 1978. My

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inspection of the same data reveals a marked slowdown for overlapping six-year periods since 1964. Through 1970, price-deflated spendable income per head rose some 20 to 24 percent every six years, but since 1973 six-year increases have dropped below 15 percent, and for 1973–1979, down to 11 percent. The feeling that things are getting worse may rest on something more substantial than the psychological "money illusion" which Thurow sees at the root of the popular malaise. (Thurow may be modifying his views; in a more recent *New York Times* column, he concedes a 3 percent fall in "real per capita standards of living" since 1976.) In fact, if per capita living standards have held up at all, the reason may be intensified labor effort—more hours worked per unit of population. Only the proliferation of the two-job household has allowed many Americans to "cope" with inflation, it seems. Furthermore, as a Bureau of Labor Statistics study showed in 1979, a rising proportion of women entering the labor force have husbands in the upper half of the income distribution, so that "the gap between above-average income families and below-average income families will widen" in the years ahead.

Doubts still more specific must be raised about the zero-sum theme that "everyone keeps up with inflation because everyone is part of the cause of inflation." Thurow's contention that lower income groups have suffered from inflation no more than upper income recipients is undercut, for example, by his own data indicating that a doubling of energy prices reduces average real incomes by 10 percent—but 5 percent for the richest decile, 34 percent for the poorest. Housing costs, pushed higher by the virtual disappearance of new rental units, likewise hit the poor harder than the rest of us, particularly since the lower the income percentile, the smaller the proportion of homeowners (and the rarer the ownership of that guaranteed "inflation hedge"). Property incomes, along with the real value of common stocks and bonds, have also felt the whiplash of inflation, but meanwhile the rich have been switching to alternative forms of wealth (commodities, real estate, mineral and oil rights, stock options). Only individuals with substantial cash reserves and knowledge of capital market opportunities can hope to find safe, inflation-adjusted methods of holding their savings.

Yet even if we grant Thurow's argument that corporate America has fully shared in the economic miseries of the past decade, the question of power would remain unaffected. The corporate sector, and its upper-income constituency, wield the veto over policies that might be adopted as remedies for serious economic problems. Price controls and comprehensive economic planning, nationalization of energy,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

massive public investment and permanent employment projects, and taxes on wealth as well as income are among the possibilities that come to mind, if never to public debate. (We shall see that Thurow himself favors some of these reforms.) The point is not that big business exercises finger-tip control over public policymaking. It is simply that private capital possesses the initiatory power, in the realms of pricing, investment, technology, and industrial relocation, that permits it to evade or subvert objectionable policies of federal, state, or local governments. Every new policy represents an intrusion that produces an equal and opposite reaction in the private sector. In the policymaking process itself, for that matter, the formation of the Business Roundtable in 1972 has given the *Fortune* 500 more cohesion and credibility at the federal level than earlier business organizations (National Association of Manufacturers, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Iron and Steel Institute, among others), which exhibited considerable corporate divisiveness on important policy issues and an inability to cope with the industry-wide regulatory reforms of the 1970s (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Consumer Product Safety Commission).

Whether agenda-shaping or actual policy formulation, the great inflation of 1966-1980 provides a classic case of business domination over social options. Nowhere in *The Zero-Sum Society* is there adequate recognition of the history-making impact of this long, accelerating inflation, which has shifted the boundaries of practicable economic policy in very significant ways. "The fight against inflation" now justifies government budget austerity and cutbacks of municipal services, which would have been inconceivable ten years ago (even in a nation where public services have been, at best, marginal). Fiscal and monetary policies, which are supposed to combat inflation and unemployment even-handedly depending on the phase of the business cycle, have been monopolized by the "anti-inflation" forces, with a resulting increase in joblessness which would have been feared by both Democrats and Republicans as "political suicide" a decade ago. The "losses" imposed on large numbers of people in the name of inflation control are unmistakable. For reasons Thurow does not consider, the business sector appears to be succeeding where the "political process" cannot.

The most disconcerting aspect of *The Zero-Sum Society* is that its author is anything but unaware of this fundamental power imbalance. In post-Keynesian, or Marxian, terms, Thurow rejects the orthodox theorem that the community of individual savers determines the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

economy's volume of investment by the way it divides its income between spending and saving. Investment occurs, holds Thurow, only when it is profitable for capitalists to invest. No rosy business horizons, no investment, period—and no jobs or government tax revenues either. Besides, "most of our savings are not personal savings but consist of the internal savings of businesses in the form of retained earnings and depreciation allowances." These "basic characteristics of U.S. capitalism" denote an economy dependent on the whims of private accumulation, and they create continuous economic instability and disequilibrium rates of return to capital—a "random walk" process that yields instantaneous wealth for a handful and a "highly skewed" distribution of wealth and income for society at large. Since World War II, a precarious, three-pronged social stabilizing mechanism has been worked out to mitigate the harshest effects of this economic free-for-all. It consists, writes Thurow, of "income transfers for the poor, direct or indirect government jobs for the middle class, and little or no taxation for wealthy capitalists."

Does this constitute a society best understood in zero-sum terms? One response to this rhetorical question comes from economic theory itself: the total level of rewards is not fixed but depends upon the specific strategies chosen and the particular coalitions which are established. There is, in other words, a gulf between Thurow's general observations about the structure of U.S. society and his analysis of its economic problems. The reason, I think, is to be found in the tendency of neoclassical economics to deal with problems one in isolation from another—the hallmark of *ceteris paribus* methodology. The core of zero-sum analysis—the Pareto-efficiency attributes which Thurow presents in a last chapter note—is based upon a number of "constants," such as the array of known technologies, supplies of capital and labor and the skill composition of the workforce, and the prevailing distribution of income and wealth. This is why, as Thurow simultaneously instructs his readers, "we cannot avoid making equity decisions in public policies, even though we can eliminate them in economic theory." Thurow, a dedicated social scientist whose moral commitment places him sky-high above most of his professional colleagues, cannot himself close the gap. He seems compelled to apply received economic theory to a set of problems which he senses are embedded in the larger social system. The upshot is a book which lacks an integrating social thesis, one which may confuse many readers by its uneasy mixture of detailed analysis of several "problems" and apparent social agnosticism.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The answers produced by such applied microeconomics are not likely to satisfy those who seek new approaches to problems like energy and housing. For both, Thurow offers short-run economic analysis which inevitably proves the self-defeating character of government intervention, whatever its origins. For nonrenewable inputs, the lesson is that "worries about natural-resource exhaustion are hard to rationalize from the point of view of economics"; market price will move inversely with quantities available and adjust demand to supply over time. For the effective supply of apartments, rent controls reduce landlords' incentives to build and maintain units while driving up prices of all types of housing. Interference with the market, whether by corporate-backed import quotas (petroleum) or by administered price controls (rent ceilings) stops real income reductions for some by stopping real income increases for someone else and freezes assets into inefficient uses. "Price controls . . . end up creating even greater shortages and higher prices in the long run."

It might be suggested that there is probably no statistical relationship between the presence (or effectiveness) of rent controls and the rate of disappearance of rental units as a result of decreases in construction and conversion of existing stock into condominiums. (One also wonders whether Thurow means to imply that nonmarket solutions to the housing crisis, through public or cooperative construction, are impossible.) Just as questionable is whether a "free market" solution can even be envisioned in the petroleum industry. The import quotas Thurow rightly labels as industry-sponsored, aimed at maintaining price levels for producers and lowering consumers' incomes, were as much a feature of demand and supply altercation as any "economic" factors: the ends sought are the same as those pursued in the formal marketplace. In these economic activities market effects are so perverse precisely because they are not occurring in free market contexts. Here, market-deprived approaches rapidly lead to intellectual dead ends, where issues are raised and left unresolved. Perhaps this is the reason Thurow seems to be performing a series of unfinished sonatas. He furnishes us clear accounts of the negative accomplishments of our politicized market solutions, hints that freer markets might produce more satisfactory results, but stops short of demonstrating how efficiency and equity might be enhanced by livelier competition and fewer regulations.

The incongruities are understandable. On one level, the U.S. economy is a huge, heterogeneous organism which defies simple prescriptions. On another, Thurow himself instinctively shies away

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from the free market, which he obviously distrusts as the ultimate social arbiter. It all underscores the fragmented quality of Thurow's analysis and his failure to link his microeconomic insights with some broader macropolicy standards. This discontinuity is what leaves the reader unprepared for the remarkable policy recommendations in the final chapter: "massive public investments, budget surpluses to generate more savings [for capital formation] . . . increases in income transfer payments, and tax cuts for the lower middle class." Corporate profits taxes and the progressive feature of the personal income tax should be eliminated, adds Thurow, in favor of taxes on wealth. The present tax system is maddeningly arbitrary at all income levels: any residual progressive effects of the federal income tax are being swamped by "horizontal inequity"—"the unequal treatment of equals" in the same revenue category. Furthermore, since "lack of jobs has been endemic in peacetime during the past fifty years of American history," the one equitable way to shift the output balance away from consumption, toward needed investment, is by stressing employment. Thurow calls for nothing less than government-guaranteed jobs for everybody, rather than mere income supplements for poorer households.

These would amount to truly radical policy changes—especially the last, which would hit capitalist priorities at their most vulnerable spot, namely, domination of labor markets with a safety valve of unemployment to keep the lid on wages during economic upswings. They are proof of Thurow's commitment to genuine social reform; but it cannot be said that they follow from his preceding zero-sum diagnosis. That framework provides no more conceptual support for Thurow's chosen reforms than, say, for neoconservative "supply-side" economics with its advocacy of large, across-the-board tax cuts and a trickle-down reliance on high profits and corporate investment to fuel faster economic growth. Significantly, *The Zero-Sum Society* is appealing to a variety of economic observers across the political spectrum. Each has digested, for his own purposes, the message that sacrifices are necessary to restore economic vitality—that larger investments must be paid for out of forgone consumption and that society cannot achieve economic advance unless some group pays the price. *Business Week,* for example, greeted *The Zero-Sum Society* as "a ruthlessly honest, tough-minded book." "Important as a clue to Thurow's priorities," a *Business Week* senior editor noted, "is that he appears to be ready to support any program—conservative as well as liberal—to spur growth, because action is superior to a status quo that will cause the U.S. economy to fail."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While serious reforms need not be structured deliberately to antagonize business interests, it is difficult to imagine inroads being made into the domain of private capital with the support and cooperation of capital itself. The key to Thurow's reforms, to be sure, is his government-underwritten job program, one certain to be resisted by the corporate sector with every means at its disposal. There is ample precedent: the business community and its congressional allies fought, and gutted, the original 1944 version of the Employment Act of 1946, with its "full employment" goal and job entitlement provision. The logic of Thurow's emphasis on employment programs is sustained by his refusal to join the "productivity" panic. Economic and financial publications have been expressing great anxiety over the slump in our measured productivity since the 1960s, with most attention directed to the drop in the rate of growth of output per worker. The corporate world is seizing upon this "productivity crisis" as a ready-made issue for persuading the government to stimulate private investment, through tax breaks, accelerated depreciation write-offs, decontrol of administered prices, and, most ominously, a lower "regulatory presence" (rollback of environmental and occupational safety reforms). "Perhaps we should invest more," Thurow answers, "but declining investment is not the source of our problems." Business-fixed investment has actually edged up as a percentage of the gross national product since the late 1940s. 70 percent of the productivity decrease can be attributed to a shift in the mix of commodities and services we produce (the growing service sector has lower efficiency levels than manufacturing or agriculture) and to underutilization of existing productive capacity (due to the slower economic growth induced by the fight against inflation). The remaining 30 percent can be traced to "particular problems in three industries—mining, construction, and utilities." Before we are stampeded into "reindustrialization," Thurow appears to be advising us, we must think through the implications of policies that would reverse the productivity decline at whatever price. To paraphrase the late Robert S. Lynd, productivity for what? For whom? And at what cost?

Thurow, in addition, mounts a systematic attack on neoconservative, antigovernment economics. Every shibboleth of the new right is cut down. Thurow shows that "big government" is relatively smaller in the United States than in practically all other capitalist nations with superior records in economic growth and technical innovation; that "the United States is by far the least regulated of all the industrialized countries"; that regulations almost never arose from ideological campaigns but from real problems which private enterprise caused but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could not or would not solve; that "there is no Left versus Right when it comes to the virtues of regulation versus deregulation. . . . At the moment, the oil industry is in favor of price deregulation and a free market, but it is well to remember that this is not their basic ideological position. The oil industry, like everyone else, is only in favor of free markets when it is in their economic interest to be in favor of free markets. . . . Political speeches are still offered up to the totem of unplanned, competitive economies, but at the first sign of trouble everyone runs to the government looking for protection."

Thurow's sketch of the process of inflation is persuasive, though here too underlying relations could be better identified. Keynesian demand management does lead to spiralling inflation, but in this age of private "indexing" of wages and prices the transmission belt is the market power of last resort—corporate pricing. Giant firms, as General Motors and Chrysler are proving to us, move quickly to absorb increases in aggregate demand, or to restore desired profit margins, by raising prices at a moment's notice. Thurow's discussion of environmentalism and economic growth will be of help to activists who must daily confront the likes of Mobil Oil, but these same activists may resent Thurow's unreflective likening of a no-growth society to the U.S. economy in the troughs of its seven postwar recessions. Thurow must know that the "stationary state" has been a topic of utopian speculation, not business cycle morphology, since John Stuart Mill's treatise on the subject in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848).

The Zero-Sum Society will be highly useful for those who can apply it in the spirit in which Thurow intends it. But its political fuzziness will allow it to be invoked to support policies Thurow might disavow. Ideological rigidity must be avoided in a world where the course of events is bound to differ from the determinate composition of forces in an economic model. Thurow's problem, however, is to invert the sequence that economists have drummed into them by their professional training—the microeconomic foundations of macroeconomic analysis. Nothing but an unvarnished view of the macroeconomic foundations of our economic system—and plight—can produce worthwhile exercises in microeconomic analysis. If the value of *The Zero-Sum Society* is limited, so is conventional economics. Should this book indicate that Thurow is wrestling with this dilemma, then it will prove to be a hopeful sign regarding one of the most fertile minds in American social science today.

RICHARD B. Du BOFF

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE POLITICS OF I. QUING

BIAS IN MENTAL TESTING. By Arthur R. Jensen. Free Press. $29.95.

The educational psychologist Arthur Jensen first attracted national attention in 1969 with a long review article called "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" In it he argued that systematic differences in scholastic performance between blacks and whites are mainly genetic in origin. The article was sharply criticized for its faulty methods of analysis and its use of inaccurate and partially bogus data. In his new book, *Bias in Mental Testing*, Jensen makes a fresh start. He no longer defends, or even mentions, the notion that whites are inherently smarter than blacks. He is also silent on the eponymous issue of his 1969 paper; the phrase "compensatory education" does not appear in the index. Yet the new book and the 1969 paper have much in common. Jensen again presents an elaborate but technically unsound argument to support a simple political thesis: affirmative action and preferential recruitment are undemocratic, he argues, and academic and occupational selection should be based on "psychometrically sound" standardized tests.

Affirmative action and preferential recruitment are undemocratic, says Jensen, because they violate two democratic principles: one, the principle of equal opportunity, and two, the principle of "treating every person according to the person's *individual* characteristics." Jensen seems not to have noticed that these two principles sometimes clash. A may be better than B at a certain skill, but he may also have had more opportunity to develop that skill. Should B be preferred at A's expense (principle one)? Or should A be preferred because, by his superior performance, he has earned the opportunity (principle two)? If A is white and B is black, the question is more complex. One may decide to discriminate in favor of B not because B himself deserves favored treatment but because a policy of reverse discrimination will promote equality of opportunity for future generations.

The principle of "treating every person according to the person's *individual* characteristics" belongs to a political tradition different from that of Locke, Jefferson, Madison, and Paine—a tradition whose most eloquent spokesman was Plato, who argued:

> The god who fashioned you mixed some gold in the nature of those capable of ruling because they are to be honored most. In those who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> are auxiliaries he has put silver, and iron and bronze in those who are farmers and other workers. You will for the most part produce children like yourselves but, as you are all related, a silver child will occasionally be born from a golden parent, and vice versa, and all the others from each other.

Socrates presents this story as a useful myth, whose acceptance would promote social harmony and stability. But how is a person's innate worth to be ascertained at an early age?

Efforts to measure innate mental ability, initiated by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, all reached the same impasse: tests of (ostensibly) innate traits did not measure intelligence; intelligence tests did not measure innate traits. Then the English psychologist Charles E. Spearman (1863-1945) proposed a solution to this dilemma. He conjectured that every intelligence test, broadly defined, assesses two distinct and independent "factors" of intelligence: an innate general factor *g* common to all tests and a specific factor that varies from test to test. Tests differ not only through their specific factors but also through the relative weights of the general and specific factors. A test of pitch discrimination, for example, is not heavily "*g*-loaded" while a test of ability to discern structure in a complex geometric figure (Raven's "Progressive Matrices," for example) is. Spearman conjectured that "higher" mental abilities—mathematical ability, for example—depend chiefly on *g*. He also suggested that blacks, as a group, are less richly endowed with *g* than whites. This "hypothesis" is the central thesis of Jensen's book.

To make the hypothesis credible one would need to rule out nongenetic factors that might systematically affect test scores. Jensen briefly discusses one such factor—the "expectancy effect," described a dozen years ago by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson. Rosenthal and Jacobson found that they could sometimes bring about substantial improvements in the IQ scores of randomly selected students by telling their teachers that a special test had shown that these students were about to experience a spurt in mental development. Rosenthal has recently summarized the outcomes of 345 studies of this kind. In 36 percent of the studies the measured effect was statistically significant at the 5 percent level. The size of the effect, averaged over the entire sample, was the equivalent of 10 IQ points. Among 43 studies with special controls for cheating and observer errors the proportion with statistically significant positive outcomes was 56 percent. These findings suggest that the expectations of teachers can indeed strongly influence the scholastic performance of their pupils. Thus it seems

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reasonable to suppose that black children do less well in school, on the average, than white children in part because their teachers expect less of them. (Books like *Bias in Mental Testing* help shape such expectations.)

How does Jensen deal with the literature on expectancy effects? "I have not found in the literature a single bona fide study showing an expectancy effect for IQ," he writes, and he goes on to cite 13 studies, none of which reported a statistically significant effect. Four of these studies, however, measured expectancy effects on something other than IQ and one of them did not measure an expectancy effect at all. Jensen does not explain how he chose this flawed and unrepresentative sample.

If IQ tests measure an inborn trait, IQ scores should remain reasonably constant in the course of individual development. Do they? The question is purely empirical, and it has been answered. The definitive study was carried out by R. B. McCall, M. I. Appelbaum, and P. S. Hogarty of the Fels Research Institute. They administered modern IQ tests to a cohort of middle-class children at regular intervals over a period of fifteen years. They found that "normal home-reared middle-class children change in IQ performance during childhood, some by a substantial amount. . . . The average individual's range of IQ between 2½ and 17 years of age was 28.5 IQ points, one of every three children displayed a progressive change of more than 30 points, and one in seven shifted more than 40 points. Rare individuals may alter their performance as much as 74 points." The study also showed that children's test scores vary systematically and in different ways as they mature. Some children do progressively better on the tests, some do progressively worse. Some reach a plateau and stay there, others peak, still others improve after a steady decline. Oddly enough, Jensen does not mention this (or any comparable) study in his long chapter on the reliability and stability of standardized tests, nor does it appear among the book's 800-odd references to the technical literature. Yet he asserts that "the stability of mental test scores during the period from infancy to maturity is roughly comparable to the stability of height and weight measurements, although mental measurements more closely resemble weight measurements in this respect."

The notion that intelligence or "reasoning ability" is a simple trait has always appealed to those psychologists who believe that some groups (the British upper class, northern Europeans) are more richly endowed with intelligence than others (the British working class, southern Europeans, the Irish, Jews, blacks). But does it have any

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

objective basis? To support the unitary view of intelligence, Jensen cites statistical evidence showing that children who perform well on one mental test tend to perform well on others. But these children also tend to be taller, healthier, and better adjusted than children who do less well on intelligence tests. To some developmental psychologists this suggests that physical, emotional, and intellectual development are interdependent and mutually reinforcing processes and that different aspects of cognitive development also interact and tend in general to reinforce one another.

There is another important source of correlation (again not mentioned by Jensen) between tests that ostensibly measure distinct abilities. Consider a test that requires the subject to match line drawings of a solid object seen from different angles. This would seem to be a pure test of spatial ability. But some people solve such problems in ways that depend heavily on verbal ability. Instead of performing appropriate mental rotations, they talk their way through the problem. Knowing this, we should not be surprised to find performance on spatial tests correlated with performance on verbal tests. Such a correlation obviously does not mean that spatial and verbal abilities both partake of some more general ability.

Contrary to the impression that Jensen gives in this book, modern psychometric research does in fact support the commonsense view that there are many distinct kinds of intelligence, which in most people tend to be unevenly developed. People with one or two strongly developed abilities are sometimes conspicuously weak in others: poets and biologists are often poor mathematicians, some painters are tone-deaf, and some musicians have no eye for color or visual form.

Bias in Mental Testing offers an elaborate apologia for mental tests and their use by educators and admissions committees. The book's first three chapters are given over to a detailed examination of various criticisms that have been leveled against standardized tests and their use. Jensen dissects first the criticisms, then their authors' motives for making them. Much of the hostility to tests, he tells us, comes from the critics' personal insecurities.

But, once again, something has been left out. Some tests measure a particular skill or kind of knowledge, others purport to test intelligence or aptitude. No one questions the possibility of devising valid and reliable tests of reading comprehension, organic chemistry, familiarity with nineteenth century English literature, or the ability to solve problems in elementary calculus. But intelligence and aptitude tests are related to skill and achievement tests much as patent medicines are to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

antibiotics. Endorsed by testimonials of questionable provenance and aggressively marketed to a credulous clientele, they have come to exert, in the opinion of many observers, a corrupting and demoralizing influence on our high schools, colleges, universities, and professional schools. That charge, increasingly documented in recent years, is one that Jensen evidently prefers to ignore.

DAVID LAYZER

CRITIC, CRITIC

ALLEGORIES OF READING: FIGURAL LANGUAGE IN ROUSSEAU, NIETZSCHE, RILKE, AND PROUST. By Paul de Man. Yale University Press. $19.50.

Paul de Man is the academic critic's academic critic. He both commands all of the techniques of traditional criticism and quickly assimilates to his critical practice the newest critical fashions. He ranges over three national literatures and is as comfortable working in the eighteenth century as he is in the late twentieth century. He has an especial interest in Romanticism and in its demise which, in this book, he dates from Nietzsche's assault on it. His favored genre is the essay, rather than the full-scale handling of a writer, tradition, or *oeuvre* which the academic critic typically prefers. *Allegories of Reading* is his second collection of essays (*Blindness and Insight* was his first); and in it he picks up and further develops themes and interests consistent with the critical convention known as "deconstruction" which, along with his colleagues at Yale University, he currently practices.

Deconstruction is an English rendering of a French term which is in turn a rendering of the German *Abbau*, literally, "unbuilding," a prominently featured concept of Heideggerian philosophy. It suggests a dismantling of a text such that its component parts can be identified and the relations among them be clearly seen, but in a nonreductive manner. The text is treated as a structure, the building of which is conceived to have occurred in such a way as to have hidden the necessarily arbitrary gestures of its inauguration. The deconstructive

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

critic takes the text apart in such a way as to permit its reader to see the process of its construction as if viewed in reverse and in slow-motion. The various moves made by the writer of the texts are interpreted, not as transformative operations governed by logical principles, but rather as "turns" (tropes or figurative displacements), the principles of which are to be found in rhetorical theory. Deconstruction, thus envisaged, is the critical practice of a linguistically sophisticated appropriation of texts which looks for its understanding of literature in a modernized version of Renaissance rhetoric. In this practice the traditional distinction between literary and other forms of discourse is dissolved. Poetry no less than prose, the lyric no less than the moral tract, philosophy no less than everyday speech, are all viewed as "texts," the constructive principles of which are construed to be the same. Behind the superficial variety of the forms which the history of literature seems to display, the deconstructive critic perceives the operations of a human consciousness that everywhere tries to make sense out of nonsense, coherence out of incoherence, the appearance of inevitability out of a practice of writing that is everywhere "blind" to the arbitrariness of what it takes to be "insights" into the nature of reality.

Allegories of Reading is divided into two parts, one entitled "Rhetoric," the other, "Rousseau." Part I is comprised of a theoretical introduction, followed by successive discussions of works by Rilke, Proust, and Nietzsche; while Part II is devoted entirely to an analysis of Rousseau's work. The juxtaposition of the two parts is ironic, for rhetoric is represented as the repressed content of every text, including those of the greatest modern advocate of "sincerity" as a principle of writing, that unrelenting enemy of *mere* rhetoric, Rousseau himself. The title, too, is ironic. For the "allegories" referred to in the title consist not only of texts that are analyzed and shown to have "rhetoric" as their repressed contents, but to de Man's own readings of these texts. He offers us an allegory of allegory. De Man's own deconstructions of the texts are allegories of *critical* reading, though saved from the "blindness" of their own allegorization by virtue of the ironic recognition that their "insights" are themselves "blind" too.

The centerpiece of de Man's book is comprised of the three chapters on Nietzsche in which he meditates upon the author of *Human, All Too Human*'s attempt to escape the snares of allegorization by affirming that all language is figurative—even the most chaste denotative discourse—that "literalness" is a myth, and that representation is impossible. Nietzsche was the quintessential "deconstructor," but as de Man shows in his analysis of *The Birth of Tragedy*, his own

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

efforts to unmask the "fallacy of reference" had to be stated in "a necessarily referential mode." But Nietzsche inaugurates a self-conscious program of deconstruction in his discovery that "deconstruction . . . is coextensive with any use of language." Nietzsche exposed the bad conscience at the heart of the nineteenth century's desire to purge discourse, prosaic as well as poetic, of every trace of rhetoric. Nietzsche shows us that the very distinctions between prose and poetry, factual and fictional discourse, philosophy and literature, referential and expressive prose, all variations on the "lie" which informs the distinction between "literalness" and "figurativeness," are untenable. The "content" or "referent" of every text is the dominant "trope" which presides over the sleights of hand by which the text is constituted.

If this is true of the literary text, it is no less true of the critical text which questions it. Questioning the text—in whatever way—involves an inquest that is always uncertain about whether its questions are intended seriously or only "rhetorically," a questioning which is uncertain about the questions it is *really* asking, even whether it is "questioning" at all. And, as de Man writes at the end of his opening essay, "The resulting pathos" of this situation "is an anxiety (or bliss, depending on one's momentary mood or individual temperament) of ignorance, not an anxiety of reference. . . ." This is clearly seen, we are assured, in Proust's representation of the "act" of reading, "not as an emotive reaction to what language does, but as an emotive reaction to the impossibility of knowing what it might be up to." And in consequence, therefore, we are instructed to recognize that "Literature as well as criticism—the difference between them being delusive—is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself."

If the pathos of modern critical theory stems from an "anxiety of ignorance," de Man's own method of reading requires, for its actualization, what might be called a willful suspension of this anxiety. There is nothing "anxious" about de Man's own critical performances. He picks his way with the utmost confidence among the complex texts with which he deals and with previous critics' efforts to come to terms with them. The texts he favors are those which are eminently self-reflexive, those which implicitly turn back upon themselves, and undermine the assumptions—about language, representation, and truth—necessary for their own elaboration. He delights in those texts which, in the very act of affirming a possible truth or a possible lie,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deconstruct their own preconditions of affirmation. Thus, for example, he concludes his reading of Rilke's lyrics with the statement: "Rilke can only be understood if one realizes the urgency of [the promise contained in his poetry] together with the equally urgent, and equally poetic, need of retracting it at the very instant he seems to be on the point of offering it to us." And again, at the close of his reading of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, he says that this work "narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight."

This might sound like a revival of that celebration of irony that we are accustomed to associate with American New Criticism. But de Man celebrates not so much irony as those kinds of "crossings" between linguistic structures and semantic functions by which the one is used to "undo" the other. Not irony, then, but paradox, contradiction, dubiety—all forms of deconstruction—are what de Man values in the texts he studies. His own metacritical deconstruction of such self-deconstructing texts is ironical, because it features explication of these "allegories of reading" which, in his estimation, these texts constitute. In fact, de Man says in the context of a discussion of Nietzsche's works: "We could call . . . all philosophic discourse an ironic allegory." This in contradistinction to the "allegorical irony" which constitutes the essence of the "literary" text. The crucial difference between texts does not consist, then, of whether they are, say, philosophical or literary, but rather the extent to which they undermine their own "authoritativeness" as representations, even of language itself, or fail to do so: the extent to which, in a word, they ascend to the status of ironic de-allegorization of their own representativeness.

Allegories of Reading will not be accessible to the general reader because of the bristling array of technical rhetorical terms which it features as the essential basis of its apparatus. Not only do the infamous *metaphor* and *metonymy* appear throughout with all the insistence of a bell tolling the end of commonsensical criticism, but all of the other monsters of figuration identified by Quintillian in *The Institutes of Oratory* are there too: *catachresis, allegoresis, chiasmus, metalepsis, litotes, synecdoche, hyperbole, antonomasia, periphrasis,* etc. Since all of these terms have equivalents in English, it might be thought that de Man's purpose would be better served by using these in preference to their intimidating Greek counterparts. But such a supposition presupposes that de Man's purpose is to serve the traditional function of the critic, which is custodial and translational, and aimed at the clarification of difficult texts for their "common" readers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

De Man does not appear to wish to participate in the traditional critic's enterprise of mediating between great classics, on the one side, and their modern readers, on the other. He does not wish to contribute to the moral or aesthetic uplifting of the ordinary modern reader by revealing the "timeless" value of the literary works of the past and present. His criticism serves as an instrument of a more specifically philosophical purpose. Or rather, metaphilosophical, even antiphilosophical purpose. For the message of de Man's work is that the millenial hope of Western man to grasp reality clearly, to represent it unambiguously in language, and to discern its nature by the exercise of a sovereign reason, the hope which Nietzsche discerned as the worm in the apple of Socratic optimism, this hope, de Man tells us, is as "illusory" as that religion which Freud dismissed in his later works as a product of a state of "blissful hallucinatory confusion."

Unlike Freud, however, who sought to replace religion with the relatively more benign insights of psychoanalysis, de Man consigns both philosophy and literature to the status of products of a "blindness" which language itself induces. His celebration of this "blindness" appears to be offered as an antidote to that multitude of "insights" which Western humanism since the Renaissance has falsely provided as its preferred pedagogical currency to its uncritical clientele. In de Man's work, the chickens of humanism have come home to roost, and their homecoming is attested in the glorification of rhetoric as both the hidden content of all previous philosophy and the instrument of that philosophy's current "deconstruction."

HAYDEN WHITE

THREE POETS

BLUE WINE AND OTHER POEMS. By John Hollander. Johns Hopkins University Press. $8.95.

THE STRENGTH OF FIELDS. By James Dickey. Doubleday. $6.

AN EXPLANATION OF AMERICA. By Robert Pinsky. Princeton University Press. $7.50.

We demand a lot from our poets: they must grow and develop, hear new voices, yet be true to themselves, find their singular

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

style. Popular culture thrives on repetition, formula, sequels, but in the more restricted art forms we have implausibly high standards of innovation. Never mind that poetry has a time-honored role as the repository of persistent values; now it seems we won't count it as worth saving, we won't allow it to grow old, unless it first is willing to be as modern as possible. The books reviewed here are not new in Rimbaud's sense, but they offer a chance for fresh considerations about how a poet might foster the growth of his mind, and our delight.

John Hollander's latest book is actually the first in a series recently inaugurated by a university press. In some ways, it serves as a new start for this poet as well. Seldom has his sensibility been so engaged with a grave but shapely music. Not that he has put away all the tools of his wit; there are a few of his usual punning literary allusions, epitomized by the turning of tag lines (he once referred to young men in a bar as "half in death with easeful love"); and his more instructive Horatian decorum and Jonsonian play are still very evident. But this is clearly his best book—best because its artifice, once so prankish and excessive it narrowed his appeal, now operates in the service of deep feeling. Yet all his demonstrative invention has not had to be sacrificed to the more straightforward measures of a plain style. Some of the book *is* plain; the "Lyric Interval," a sequence of short lyrics that comprise the book's middle section, skillfully blends Elizabethan songbook echoes and more modern, even grimly clipped, tones:

> It is not longing,
> It is all the wideness of dark water,
> It is our quiet
> Enislement which makes of this dimmed, distant
> Speech a mode of song.

Pervaded with a sense of painful loss and longing, this poetry never succumbs to self-display or self-pity ("Another Sky" warns against just these dangers). The masterful title poem, however, is almost pure joy. The blue wine serves as an excess "signifier," a symbol whose many possible meanings—it can be read as the totally arbitrary realm of art, the writer's ink, an impossible but imaginable nature, an ancestral truth no longer immediately present but active in the memory—are explored with a wondrous range of tones, from mildly satiric to mysteriously archaic. Though tightly structured, this volume is not as keyed with clever puzzles as *Reflections on Espionage*, nor as exuberantly driven as *The Head of the Bed*. Here, however, there are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

few poems that don't contain one of these complex words (in the Empsonian sense): all, shadow, mirror, and memory. "All" recurs to demonstrate a gathering of considerations; the poet moves towards a philosophical stance, a love affair with generality: "what all shall come to for us." The recurrence of shadows displays the questioning that drives the book's desires: "Moments of astonishing shadow." We occasionally witness the narcissism associated with mirrors, but more often these objects represent the problems of doubling and interiority: "The Thing in the mirror neither greeted me nor reproached." And memory operates everywhere: in the many kinds of doublings, in a witty poem on "Deja Vu," in the sense of a lover departed but still painfully present:

> Along the wet walls outside the bare trees
> I wait and decide not to walk now
> In the cold park, but that ghost of me
> Who would have gone your way enters there.

Tropes of thought and feeling unite the book with two central notions: the dialectic of dark issuing from light (and vice versa), and the sense of our future selves evolving out of our present limitations. The first preoccupation dominates Hollander's visual sense, and fills the poetry with shadows and chiaroscuro, hidden depths and revealing surfaces. The second concern provokes melodies of loss and promise, insight and ignorance. The final poem in the book, "Nox Regina," draws both concerns together; it builds on an urgent questioning addressed to the mythical lady of the darkened world: "Why does she permit . . ./ Darkness to be so full/ Of possibility[?]" Why is her rule so indecent, the poet complains, and the answer comes with star-struck ambiguity:

> —Oh she is lonely and
> Her many eyes, dimly
> Turned down on us as if
> Glimmering, all are blind.

For Hollander, poems are like those "bottles of blue wine," and what he does with them is clearly what he desires his ideal reader to do: "he may take some drops home with him/ In the clear cup of his own eye, to see what he will see." This is a book about seeing and being on the look-out-for, and at its best it is boldly and subtly written, with "the common inks of/ Day and night."

The careful control and tender feeling Hollander achieves com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pletely elude James Dickey, though there is little reason to suppose he has sought such virtues. Instead, Dickey has become more and more himself, changing only by intensifying the mode he revealed in *The Eye-Beaters, etc.* and *The Zodiac*. His is a poetry of strut and rhetoric, which all too often becomes posture and bombast. Behind the strains of this book we can hear the gothic measures of a certain kind of southern writing—the same strains that are evident in the fiction of William Styron, for example. Operating in a world of heavy losses and crushing failures, Dickey's speaker's argument doesn't seem to be with us or with himself; rather, he addresses a projection of virtues and possibilities whose absence he laments while yet realizing they provide his only fitting subject. He must fondle and he must cry for these lost exaltations, but the crying becomes shriller and shriller, so we can hardly tell if he's lost them or if he's deluding himself about them in the first place. The poem for the death of Vince Lombardi, a petty and ridiculous figure foisted on us by the media's exploitative hungers, stands as a typical example of Dickey's excesses. Our lack of communal heroic virtues remains a serious ethical problem in America, but judging from this poem, with its unconscious self-parody, it's hard to know if Dickey realizes it's a problem or is simply taking delight in his own corn pone mixture of *machismo* and bonhomie:

> Yet running in my mind
> As Paul Horning, I made it here
> With the others, sprinting down railroad tracks,
> Hurdling bushes and backyard Cyclone
> Fences, through city after city, to stand, at last, around you
> Exhausted, exalted, pale
> As though you'd said "Nice going": pale
> As a hospital wall. You are holding us
> Millions together. . . .

Lombardi is dying of cancer, and in Dickey's most tasteless image, the coach's carcinomatous organ is apotheosized as a constellation (that "exalted" from the passage above is going to be vindicated at all costs!):

> . . . the surgeons got themselves
> Together and cut loose
> Two feet of your large intestine, the Crab whirled up
> whirled out
> Of the lost gut and caught you again
> Higher up. Everyone's helpless
> But cancer. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is nothing else in this book quite as egregious as this, but neither is there anything to indicate we should take this as intentionally ironic or humorous. The book also includes the title poem, written for Jimmy Carter's inauguration, which builds on a bad combination of ersatz populism ("we know simplicity/ Is close to the source that sleeping men/ Search for in their home-deep beds.") and what I can only call pompous false humility ("My life belongs to the world. I will do what I can"). The press tells us Dickey is Jimmy's favorite poet. Others may take heart in remembering that, if we wish, we can change administrations every four years.

Robert Pinsky's book, his second, is largely made up of the long three-part title poem, with its ambitious subject and its beautifully appropriate modesty of style. Pinsky, like Hollander, has Horace and Jonson for models, with others such as Auden, Lowell, and Bishop. But his work is not derivative in the negative sense; it puts to use translation and imitation in the best, most artistic sense of these activities, ones that might strike some as "non-American," given our lust for originality. Unlike Dickey, Pinsky avoids bombast or overreaching to embrace his subject. Indeed, his discursive tact and careful self-reflectiveness manage to contain more of the weight, the feel, and yes, the emptiness, of America than dozens of would-be down home straight talkers. The poem is addressed to his daughter, or rather his idea of her, and so one of the chief problems of American poets, finding the right interlocutor, is adroitly solved. This solution allows Pinsky to be direct and playful, grandiloquent and humble, movingly emotional and complexly analytic as his poetic needs shift and unfold. Built in fairly tight free verse paragraphs, the three parts each have four sections; in some ways the poem recalls Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (the parts have titles like "Its Many Fragments" and "Its Great Emptiness"). Alas, though this gives the poem the proper gravity and pliability, it makes it hard to quote from. But I've read the poem several times, the last few times going through it at one sitting, and I'm struck by how its tonal variety and its structural integrity are hallmarks of very high poetic talent. And I think its emotional and intellectual center is the product of a kind of genius. (A tribute to Pinsky: one imagines the speaker in this book would be somewhat embarrassed by such high praise.)

The poem begins with the trope of America as a prison; throughout Pinsky wrestles with the temptation to surrender to a sort of "gloom of the Tory satirist." But he eschews satire, though his wry observations can include subjects usually subjected to satire by Ameri-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can poets, such as shopping malls and "the FM station that plays 'All Country and Western.'" Pinsky is, like Emerson, a moral poet but not a didactic one, and he treats Vietnam as the determining event of his generation; this book contains, among other things, some of the best poetry written about that war. Also contained here are a translation of an epistle by Horace; a deft allusion to, and expansion of, a conceit from a poem by Ben Jonson where a child returns to its mother's womb when it sees the shambles of the world it is being brought into; personal recollections about his own boyhood; recountings of his daughter's appearances in two school plays (they serve as the beginning and end of the poem); and so on, a range of subjects and figurative transformations far beyond the scope of the usual "slim volume of verse." Pinsky is an extremely literate poet; he quotes from Nietzsche and Malcolm X, and in a few lines deftly offers a "reading" of *The Winter's Tale*. Yet none of this sits heavily in the poem, as its inventive language is maneuvered through a series of proposals, counterstatements, dream-visions, reportage, and lyric excursions. This is a poet with many wise and interesting things to say about his subject, and he says them with an uncommon skill and sweetness. We have been given one of the new, telling voices of America; the rest is up to us.

CHARLES MOLESWORTH

BARTH ON BARTH

LETTERS. John Barth. G.P. Putnam's Sons. $8.95.

In the 1950s John Barth wrote two austere novels about solitude and marriage that looked hard, hard, at the doings of passion, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*. Not much nature description, no sweet talk at all, but much rigorous dialogue, and a helluva lot of cold scrutiny. The writing constituted a new and singular style in American fiction. Todd Andrews and Jacob Horner, the respective anti-heroes of *Opera* and *Road*, were at once too vulnerable to be tough and too bright to be tender, so they were distinctively aloof. And they wrote a spare and lucid prose that immediately established Barth's eccentricity as an American writer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is no stylistic extravagance in this fiction, no enthusiasm; the rhetoric is the rhetoric of argument, of disputation. Without being showily philosophical, the novels *were* philosophical. A nihilist comedy, so Barth has described them, and a nihilist tragedy.

Then came the *tour de force*, a long novel written in the mode of Defoe and Smollett, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), in which Barth easily and humorously demonstrated his virtuosity as a novelist. Not only does *The Sot-Weed Factor* crackle with the energy of pure narration, good storytelling, but it is as well recondite, urbane, and it comes round at last with a fair interpretation of American history, if not of historical writing itself. What follows is still a grand conundrum, the symbolical allegory, *Giles Goat-Boy*, which no doubt sits now beside William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* on that shelf reserved for long books too smart for their own good, too smart and too scarce in pleasure. *Giles Goat-Boy* led Barth directly into the metafictional mode that flourished in the seventies, and he became, as soon as the term was invented, an exemplary post-modernist. *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera* are collections of related short pieces and retold tales, irascibly written. Some of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* are superb: "Night-Sea Journey," "Petition," and Barth's retelling of *A Thousand and One Nights* in *Chimera* transcends the self-conscious narration.

I briefly rehearse Barth's career because all these fictions, these different styles and modes, are united in *Letters*, Barth's latest novel. Where have I been? What am I doing? These are the questions that dominate this immense, boring, learned, precious novel. The key to the treasure, Barth has cleverly written, is of course the treasure. For all of Barth's contrary protestation, *Letters* is a *roman à clef*, and the *clef* is heavy, the *oeuvre* itself, and no treasure at all. The novel simply does not stand on its own two feet. It is written to Barth from Barth (one thinks of the economy of *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes), and it is written for the adept, for the cryptographer. There are the letters of the alphabet and there are the letters we send to each other, messages, and in the cross play of this double reference Barth establishes the governing frame of his fiction. The acrostical letters of the first kind are the ones that matter in *Letters*, not those of the second kind. Barth writes letters to all his major characters, and they write back. The best respondent is Jacob Horner. The others do not command attention. The dullest of the letter writers is the newest, Germaine Amherst, born in this book, a garrulous latter-day Mrs. Montague whose existence is purely formal.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Where have I been? What am I doing? Barth is as loquacious as Germaine Amherst, and tells us repeatedly at regular intervals: "Currently I find myself involved in a longish epistolary novel, of which I know so far only that it will be regressively traditional in manner; that it will *not* be obscure, difficult, or dense in the modernist fashion; that its action will occur mainly in the historical present, in tidewater Maryland and on the Niagara Frontier; that it will hazard the resurrection of characters from my previous fiction, or their proxies, as well as extending the fictions themselves, but will not presume, on the reader's part, familiarity with those fictions, which I cannot myself remember in detail. In addition, it may have in passing something to do with alphabetical letters." Early in *Letters*, the most studied and foolish of the correspondents, Jerome Bray, whose origin appropriately is *Giles Goat-Boy*, raises the question of plagiarism. He accuses the Author, and wants Todd Andrews (from *The Floating Opera*) to press charges. Barth does not openly pursue the issue, and yet the question is implicit in the very conception of the novel.

Plagiarism, it might be said, is the hidden anxiety of metafictional writing. Beginning with *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth happily stole from traditional sources, and as late as *Chimera* he was still, with considerable wit and ingenuity, transforming familiar tales and myths. Like many of his peers at the end of the fifties, he had turned abruptly from the realist novel to explore the fabulous, to reappropriate classical narrative, with the peculair twist of post-modernist despair. This fiction, as everyone knows, is filled with outcries, interpolations, with bursts of temper, with breakdowns. If representation of the "real" world had proved tiresome, imitation of the purer world of classical narrative turned out to be twice as arduous. Each mythy tale was now inclosed in a body of diverse interpretation, and the writer had to confront the truth that his fiction, at some point, was just another interpretation, however cleverly construed—or worse, the impersonation of a plagiarist. Like Humbert Humbert wrestling with Clare Quilty, the writer struggled with a knowing interpreter, himself; an unhappy condition that reduced Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse* to the device of multiple quotation marks, to echoing Echo graphically.

Imitation reveals, plagiarism conceals. What, then, is hidden in *Letters*? An elaborate discourse on the impossibility of writing historical fiction. Time presses on this novel. The Author intermittently deluges the reader with headlines, the six o'clock news, his time, his place, the incoherence of it, and then there is the blather of his several correspondents, his revivified characters, who tell us of their progeny,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their new jobs, new amours, who have all come to know one another, and beneath this line is the broken back of a historical novel about the Federalist period, a great wreck of data, of dates and places. Strewn lumber. Such are the horns of Barth's dilemma in *Letters*: the mess of the present, the morass of the past. The first letter in *Letters* arrives from Marshyhope State University. Where have I been? What am I doing? The subjective question is an objective problem, the novel. The letters fill the silence, fill the void between the question and the problem, are the tinkle of a long exercise, but to write them (and some *are* ingenious) Barth must steal from himself, and what he takes is not always the best. It is a curious phenomenon. At its worst, when it is skillful, plagiarism is a theft of power. An intelligent plagiarist does not just reletter another's writing, copy out a passage from Sartre and stick it in his text; he takes the force of such writing from its original place and reletters that, rebegins that, in a new context. He does not elaborate, or change, the stolen power. What he has taken is used to conceal an absence, to cover a rift, and invariably the relocation, the theft, shows. The Jacob Horner of the *Letters* is not as good as the Jacob Horner of *The End of the Road*, and ditto for Todd Andrews, for Ambrose Mensch, for the Author himself.

NEIL SCHMITZ

IMAGINATION OF THE SELF

THE MYSTERIES OF IDENTITY. By Robert Langbaum. Oxford University Press. $14.95.

Some years ago Lionel Trilling remarked that readers in quest of a sense of the way we live now were less likely to go to fiction, as nineteenth century readers would have done, than to the social sciences, which, for all of our casual condescension, had moved into the vacuum: as fiction retreated from a concern with the substance of our lives and the contours of our culture, the social sciences discovered things to say about the way we live now that were recognizable and vital. It was a startling observation when Trilling made it, more than half-true. Since then the question Trilling raised has gone undiscussed, but it has also not gone away: the competing claims of literature and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the social sciences to tell us what we need to know both about the texture of our daily lives and the nature of our selves.

Robert Langbaum's *The Mysteries of Identity* implicitly addresses the question. "Identity," of course, is a word drawn neither from literature nor from literary criticism. Of Langbaum's chief examples—Wordsworth, Arnold, Eliot, Beckett, Yeats, and Lawrence—it is a safe guess that none of them used the word in a sense in which we now use it, to refer to the nature and continuity of the self. It is an abstraction which enters the vocabulary of discursive prose, as Langbaum notes, in the eighteenth century and a word which we now associate most firmly with Erik Erikson. Most of us now, as Langbaum is ingratiatingly aware, are likely to greet the word with a certain fatigue. And so it is an act of some courage for him to lay out, in his introductory chapter, the problematics of his subject, drawing not only from Rilke and Dostoevsky but also from Freud, Erikson, Erving Goffman, and Christopher Lasch. Implicitly, the book seems to say, now that we think we know what we need to know about "identity," to the point of satiety, to the point of that cloying, culture-wide narcissism that appalls Lasch, it is time to ask how literature has addressed the construct and found the resources to tell us what the best of the sociologists and ego psychologists could not know.

It is good to be able to say that "identity" looks altogether different once Langbaum detaches himself from the social scientists and begins to move through his great exemplars. For one thing, his exposition gives him the occasion to gather some of the most moving passages from his representative authors. (It is a frightfully patronizing thing to say, but true of nearly all books of critical exposition that the most striking passages are the block quotes.) There is that splendid Wordsworthian phrase "field of light," indicating, in its epiphanic context, the union of memory and sensation, mind and nature. There is Arnold's great line from "Grand Chartreuse," placing the modern consciousness "between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born." There is Yeats's line from *Mythologies*, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." And there is Clov's amazing line from *Endgame*: "There's no more nature." Furthermore, Langbaum's exposition makes clear the dialectical and dramatic nature of each writer's sense of identity—not an abstraction but a vision, worked out in the arena of culture, tradition, and self. Most important, Langbaum's literary examples project a vital sense of the possibility that nonliterary works can rarely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

permit themselves—possibilities lost, the imagination of the self recovered and reconstituted.

To summarize the argument, Langbaum begins with Wordsworth's reaction against eighteenth century epistemology, tracing his recovery of the unity of self and nature, then moves to Arnold, for whom that unity can no longer hold and for whom the alternative unity of self with art and culture is finally unsatisfying. The result, for Arnold, is a perception of diminished energy, that enervated, elegiac view that leads easily to the two exhibits of twentieth century terminality, Eliot and Beckett. From the "zero identity" of Beckett, no further diminution is possible. Yet Yeats and Lawrence, as Langbaum demonstrates at length, find ways of reconstructing the self, the former by an intricate movement by means of which the self is recreated, as a work of art, virtually deified, and the latter, of course, by the recovery of the body and the religion of love.

The argument is so lucid, so responsible, and so intelligent that I ask myself, with some embarrassment, why I find it unsatisfying. Langbaum has done his work. Is the dissatisfaction my fault? Well it is and it isn't. I do like books, whatever the subject, that carry with their argument a sense of wit and play, not much of which is here. And I look for the book to open out at its end, posing tentative ways of thinking about life and art in our time. And, although Langbaum surely wishes his book to do just that, it does, ending with *Women in Love*, close in at its end. Perhaps it is unfair to wish for both wit and speculation. Yet there are difficulties inherent in the treatment, apart from the problematics of one resistant reader.

The book is highly selective, as Langbaum knows and acknowledges. How could it be otherwise? One does not wish for a multivolume history of the idea of identity. The problem is that the selections consist not only of significant figures in the transmutation of the sense of identity but of figures for whom the idea, qua idea, was central, figures who addressed it with a certain deliberateness. Arnold contemplated the self and is represented. A dozen figures of major consequence roughly contemporary with Arnold—Dickens, George Eliot, Meredith, Mill, Ruskin—projected the question of identity in works of the first importance but did not isolate it and address it. And so Arnold stands as Langbaum's Victorian example, leaving unasked the question of the extent to which Arnold speaks for Meredith, Ruskin, or anybody else. Lawrence wrestles with the question of identity in a way that Joyce does not. Yet Joyce can hardly be said to be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

less concerned with the question, only less explicit. And so the intersection of Lawrence with Joyce or anybody else of his time and place goes unexamined, as does the question of what happens to the apprehension of identity when it is not conceptualized but integrated into a substantial work.

Whatever the intricacies of Yeats's private mythology, and it is, God knows, intricate and private, as Langbaum's discussion, roughly a third of the book, demonstrates, a considerable clarity emerges, not all of which is due to Langbaum's exegetical skill. If one is in quest of the idea of identity, however, no such clarity emerges from—one chooses almost at random—Faulkner, Nabokov, Genet, Butor, Grass, and Böll, even though all of them scarcely wrote a page which can not be said to be "about" identity. In short, when the nature of the self is isolated and contemplated by a writer, it takes on a certain form, a certain restricted set of anxieties and problematics. It is certain points in the history of that contemplated idea, realized in literary works, that Langbaum treats, leaving untreated, for good or ill, that implicit sense of identity that every writer of consequence since Wordsworth has integrated. And so it is that a reader of Yeats, hoping to understand him within a historical continuity, will understand him better for the fine intelligence of Langbaum. But a reader of Hawkes or Bellow, hoping to find a wedge into *their* mysteries of identity, will find that his inquiry and Langbaum's are not the same.

PHILIP STEVICK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Among the best 50 pages of poetry published this year."
— STANLEY PLUMLY, *Washington Post Book World*

The Shore
DAVID ST. JOHN

"A handsome collection of lovely and fluent lyric poems, acknowledging the grime and sadness, naming the battered stage-props of our lives, but rising nevertheless to nothing less than melody and grace. A sound and rare accomplishment." — ANTHONY HECHT

$10.00 cloth; $4.95 paper

"A profoundly innovative book...deserves the attention of every serious reader."
— ALAN WILLIAMSON, *Washington Post Book World*

Four Good Things
JAMES McMICHAEL

"A long poem of enormous range and liveliness, that keeps attaining its unity in a series of unpredictable but perfectly coherent ways...In its emotional richness and splendor, it's an unexcelled contemporary poem." — ROBERT PINSKY

$8.95 cloth; $4.95 paper
8th Selection in the Houghton Mifflin New Poetry Series

Houghton Mifflin Company
Now at your bookstore, or write to
Houghton Mifflin Company, 2 Park St., Boston, Mass. 02107

PARTISAN REVIEW
Published at Boston University

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTRARIES
Essays
JOYCE CAROL OATES

Imbued with her own emotional responses and enlivened by her experience as a writer, Oates's essays confront the contradictions to which readers respond emotionally in Conrad's *Nostromo*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Lawrence's *Women in Love*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and English and Scottish traditional ballads.

208 pp., $15.00

JOHN DONNE
Life, Mind, and Art
JOHN CAREY

In the first comprehensive study in a decade of Donne and his art, Carey presents a picture of the poet against the background of Renaissance skepticism and science. Beginning with an account of his life, the book examines in detail the whole scope of his work — his poetry, sermons, letters, spiritual and controversial works, and such highly personal documents as the treatise on suicide — to lay bare the shaping principles of Donne's imagination.

336 pp., $19.95

BOUNDS OUT OF BOUNDS
A Compass for Recent American and British Poetry
ROBERTA BERKE

In her survey of poetry from 1960 to the present "Berke gives a lively and clear account of the kinds of poetry being written today, with close-up views of poems that have become modern classics. It is heartening to have a critic of contemporary verse who speaks out boldly and aims at the common reader rather than at the specialist...Stimulating and controversial." — Louis Simpson. "A very thorough, clear-headed, and useful introduction." — A. Alvarez

222 pp., $14.95

WORDS FAIL ME
PHILIP HOWARD

Who first conceived the notion that Cheshire cats smile (a century before Lewis Carroll)? Where did we get the idea that jumbo, as in jumbo-jet, meant elephant? In his characteristically entertaining way, Howard continues his exploration of the state of the language, investigating the coining of new words, the fading away of old ones, and how words have changed their meanings.

250 pp., $13.95

At your bookstore or send your check to:

OXFORD
University Press

SINCE 1478

Box 900-81-063 200 Madison Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10016

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED